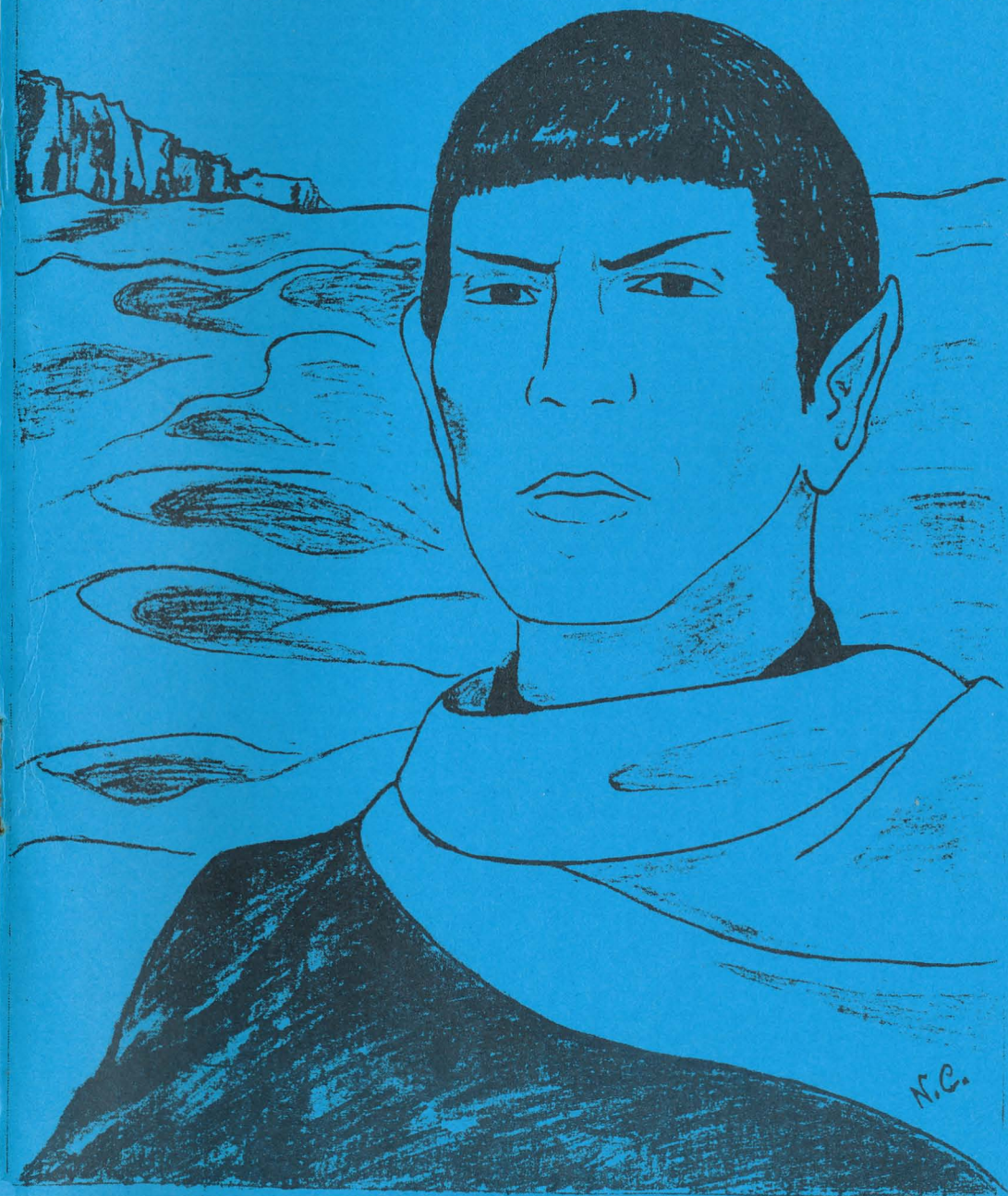


Sci-Tpress

Unchained

Memories



UNCHAINED MEMORIES

Story and Artwork

by Nicole Comtet

Although complete in itself, *Unchained Memories* forms the final part of the Spock/T'Kahalin trilogy.

In *Return to the Source*, Spock, delivering secret information to Vulcan, is captured and interrogated by Romulan agents. He is only saved by his mental links with Kirk and Sarek. His meeting with the musician T'Kahalin speeds his recovery.

In *Blowback*, Kirk, Spock and McCoy are taking leave on Vulcan. T'Pring, tired of her life with Stonn, seeks revenge by trapping Spock into a traditional duel with him. T'Kahalin persuades T'Pau to intervene.

Now, in *Unchained Memories*, Vulcan must decide between the teaching of Surak and the traditional ways. T'Pring makes one final bid for revenge, and the relationship between Spock and T'Kahalin is decided.

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UNCHAINED MEMORIES

CHAPTER 1

"I don't know about you, Jim," remarked Dr McCoy, "but I can't begin to realise that it's only been a week since we arrived."

"Only a week? Mmmm... so much has happened that it seems more like a month," Kirk sighed.

"Yeah, and if Sarek hadn't returned in the nick of time, T'Pol's machinations would've come off, and by now you'd probably be bereft of your First Officer."

"Those blasted warriors! Makes me see red just to think of them," Kirk retorted feelingly.

The Captain and the CMO of the Enterprise were relaxing by the pool of Ambassador Sarek's residence and recalling the events which a few days ago had set the placid community of ShiKahr astir with shocked outrage.

"Uh huh," McCoy acknowledged, "that was a close thing for sure. All the same, it was sheer bad luck to come and spend our leave here just when that darned girl happened to come back home. Damned coincidence!"

"Coincidence? I wonder..." Kirk mused.

"You wonder what?" The Doctor looked sceptical. "That she might have had it all planned? I grant you that for pulling crooked schemes she takes the biscuit, but it's a long way to proving that she timed her return to Vulcan on purpose."

"I wouldn't put it past her," the Captain muttered darkly.

The pleasant sound of ice cubes clinking in glasses made them look round and there, in a swirl of lavender silks, came the lady of the house carrying a laden tray.

"Please, stay where you are," Amanda said as the two men made to stand up. "I'll gladly join you for a drink." She sat down and handed them frosted glasses of gukk juice. "We Humans need to drink a lot in this climate, don't we?" she added pleasantly.

"Seems to me that we've done nothing but drink and eat in this house," McCoy remarked. "You can't imagine how they've spoiled us."

A smile lit Amanda's blue eyes. "Good!" she replied. "I knew I could rely on Staurak and his staff to look after you while we were away. I only wish you had been spared that unfortunate demonstration of Vulcan savagery. My god! How *could* they?"

"That's what Jim and I were just talking about," McCoy told her, "and my conclusion is still the same: that Spock came out of it alive is nothing short of a miracle."

"Yes, I dread to think what would have happened had our return been delayed," Amanda said fervently, then leaning forward she lowered her voice. "But Doctor, I can't help being concerned about Spock. He wants me to believe that he is fully recovered, but I know better, and I'd be glad of your medical opinion. What do you think?"

"Well..." McCoy assumed his professional air, "the check I gave him this morning - under his protest, mind you - confirmed the improvement in his

physical condition. His wounds are practically healed, except that nasty gash in his shoulder which will need a few more days to close properly, but on the whole Spock is pulling through as well as can be expected. You don't have to worry, Amanda."

"Physically, yes, but..." Amanda paused, an unspoken question in her eyes.

"If you mean the psychological trauma," McCoy resumed, "yes, no doubt he is still affected, but who wouldn't be in his place after T'Pring's betrayal? A shock of that magnitude is bound to leave mental scars for a time. He will eventually forgive and forget."

"Forgive, perhaps; but forget...? No, Leonard. Vulcans never forget," Amanda replied sadly.

This gave the two men pause, and they pondered on this further singularity of the Vulcan brain.

"Hmmm," Kirk nodded moodily, "total recall - is it a blessing or a curse, I wonder? Dammit! there are things in one's life that are best forgotten. Imagine having them constantly in memory. How can you live with that? Spock told me once that Vulcans know no hate, no resentment. Sounds wonderful, but how can they keep themselves from hating people who have wronged them if they remember everything? Vulcans are no saints... or are they?"

"No, Jim, they are not," Amanda answered softly, "but at least they strive to attain perfection by adhering to logic, and achieving a total mastery of their minds. They are able to block destructive emotions from their conscious minds, and thus achieve some degree of peace and serenity. Does that answer your question?"

"It does indeed," Kirk nodded, remembering how Spock had spent hours in meditation since he had been released from T'Lian's ward, "and I know of many occasions when that method might well serve and save us a lot of trouble. Does that kind of meditation work for Humans?"

"Yes, to a certain extent, but I must confess that a mother finds it difficult to forget the wrongs done to her son," she replied.

"And who could blame you," McCoy exclaimed, "especially in view of recent events. Heaven knows I'm only an emotional Human, but I don't mind saying that I'd wring that girl's neck without the least compunction."

"Well I trust that your Judicial Council will take disciplinary action and that T'Pring will get her just deserts at last," Kirk said. "Do you know how long the hearings will last, Amanda?"

"A few more days, I believe," she sighed. "I do wish this case was over and done with. It's so painful for all concerned."

"Apparently," McCoy remarked wryly, "there are some Vulcans around who are quite capable of destructive emotions. But from what you've told me, I assume that people like T'Pring are the exception."

A shadow passed over Amanda's face and she paused before replying. "They are, fortunately. I've not lived all these years on Vulcan without acquiring a certain understanding of the people. Vulcans do not permit themselves emotional release, but there are exceptions to every rule, and T'Pring is one of them, as we learned to our cost."

"Then why the heck did you pick her

as a bride for Spock?" McCoy asked bluntly. "Don't tell me there were no other eligible girls around."

"Easy, Bones," Kirk protested, but Amanda, not in the least put out by McCoy's outburst, looked at them and replied simply,

"You are right, Leonard. There were some very nice girls whom I would have preferred for my son, but the choice was not mine. We had to abide by the Family's decision."

"Oh? Something like a marriage of convenience?" Kirk suggested.

"Yes, a tradition still maintained in ancient families. In fact the match was pre-arranged two generations ago," Amanda explained.

"Do you mean that Spock and T'Pring were engaged before they were even born?" asked McCoy, wide-eyed.

"Yes, Doctor, all because of Sarek's father, who had a close friend, and they arranged for their children to marry. You know that on Vulcan a parent's decision is law, disobedience is unthinkable. However, when Sarek entered on a diplomatic career he was eventually assigned to Earth and... Well..." Amanda shrugged with a smile.

"... and he found you," McCoy finished, much amused. "And then what happened? Scandal in ShiKahr?"

"Not quite, but I must admit that Sarek's bonding with a Human stirred a great deal of curiosity, and caused a few shock waves among the 'Old Guard', as the traditionalists are called here," Amanda conceded, a twinkle in her eye. "And the first months I spent here were... let us say... somewhat difficult."

"What about your father-in-law? How did he take it?" asked the Captain.

"Much better than we anticipated. He was a remarkable man, a true adept of IDIC," she said with a reminiscent smile. "But naturally the marriage arrangement was transferred to the next generation, and when he was seven Spock was pledged to little T'Pring."

"What was she like then?" Kirk enquired with interest.

"T'Pring? At that time she was a very pretty, well-behaved child," Spock's mother replied. "It was only at the bonding ceremony that I had some inkling of her true nature. I remember my shock when I saw her cold, disdainful expression in such a young child. And Spock's hurt, bewildered look when they touched minds for the first time. He told me afterwards that his shy approach in the link was met with strong aversion and contempt. We thought at first that her negative reaction was due to her inexperience, and perhaps to the strong ascendancy of her mother's family, staunch traditionalists. But events proved that her character was not of the kind one would expect of a Vulcan." She sighed. "I know it's useless to waste time in vain regrets, but I can't help wishing that we had given our son a wife who made him happy."

"Such as T'Kahalin, for instance?" McCoy suggested slyly.

"Yes." Amanda smiled thoughtfully. "Yes, T'Kahalin would have made a perfect match for Spock, a charming, sensible, highly intelligent girl."

"And stunningly beautiful into the bargain," Kirk put in.

"Yes, isn't she?" Amanda agreed, then suddenly realising what they were

talking about she looked inquiringly at the two men, who gazed quizzically back at her, and she asked with a laugh, "How well do you know T'Kahalin?"

"Well enough to agree with you, Amanda," said the Doctor with a smug grin.

"Let me explain," Kirk intervened. "You see, since our arrival here Spock has taken us around, has introduced us to a number of people. We met T'Kahalin on several occasions, and have come to know and appreciate this lovely lady. Furthermore, our perceptive Doctor here has drawn my attention to the particular interest she and Spock seem to have in each other."

"Interest?" scoffed McCoy. "You mean fascination, Jim! Remember that night at the concert? They were so absorbed in one another that the universe might have crashed about their pointed ears for all they cared."

Amanda let out a delighted chuckle. "So you did notice! I'm so glad. It means then that the mutual attraction they seemed to develop two years ago is still going strong."

"Two years ago? That was when Spock came here on that secret mission, wasn't it?" Kirk asked. "Fancy! And he never said a word about her." Then, catching sight of Amanda's raised eyebrows he amended with a grin, "Not that he would, of course. Vulcans are kind of reserved about these things, aren't they?"

"They are indeed," said Amanda. "Such private matters are never mentioned. I only wish, though, that their understanding would develop into something more tangible than mutual admiration."

Amanda's candid admission drew a chortle from McCoy and a knowing smile from the Captain. "Do you? Then perhaps I could help," he said.

The lady blinked in surprise. "You could help, Jim? In what way?"

Kirk's eyes twinkled. "I think that the object is to make Spock realise and accept their 'mutual attraction' and to encourage him to make a decision about it," he declared.

"Sounds fine," McCoy drawled, "but how do you propose to do that, since Vulcans don't talk about their private lives?"

"Of course, a direct approach is out of the question, Bones, but believe me, there are ways and means, more subtle and efficient, to arouse his curiosity, then his suspicion, and eventually his jealousy. In other words - agent provocateur."

"Agent provocateur? You, Jim? That'll be the day!"

The Lady Amanda, much amused, shook her head. "It sounds very ingenious, but I'm afraid that arousing envy or jealousy in a Vulcan is a hopeless undertaking, even for the Captain of the Enterprise," she said with a touch of humour. "Spock will just ignore your provocations - provided that he takes any notice of them at all."

"I don't know about that," Kirk replied, a cunning look in his eyes. "I believe he can be provoked, to judge from certain comments he made when we first met T'Kahalin. Anyway, I can but try - with your agreement, of course."

Amanda paused for thought, then decided, "Well, why not? if you think you can induce him to make up his mind."

"That's all very well, Jim, but you don't stand a chance with an unemotional Vulcan female. Your legendary charm will have no effect on T'Kahalin, especially as she only has eyes for Spock. How do you propose to capture and hold her attention?"

McCoy sounded sarcastic; he was answered with an impish grin.

"Simple, Bones. I'll talk about Spock."

CHAPTER 2

At that moment the subject of their conversation appeared on the patio, walking in their direction. The Vulcan's regal bearing and sober elegance would have struck the most casual observer, but the three who knew him best only noticed subtle signs of tension in his posture and the set of his jaw. Obviously the hearings at the Council and the confrontation with Stonn and T'Pring had been anything but pleasant.

"Mother, gentlemen." Spock greeted them with a formal bow. "Staurak told me that I would find you by the pool."

"Sure, Spock." The Captain gave his friend a welcoming smile. "Staurak knows our favourite place; it's so nice and cool by the waterfall. Come and join us?"

"Do sit down for a moment, Spock - I'm sure you need rest," his mother said with a searching look. "I shall go and fetch you a drink."

"Unnecessary, Mother, Staurak is seeing to that," he told her, and sat down wearily on the garden seat beside her.

"Where is your father?" she asked. "Did he stay in town?"

"No, he is in the study at the moment, in communication with Sradek."

"Professor Sradek? Whatever for?" Amanda wondered.

"Sradek's expert opinion is required by the Judicial Council over a point of history," Spock replied with a sidelong glance at his Captain.

"Ha, Mr Spock," the latter said with an amiable grin, "so I'm not the only one to take an interest in Vulcan history," a remark which earned him the rise of an eyebrow and the reply,

"Indeed, Captain. Professor Sradek's knowledge appears to be much called on these days."

Amanda sensing some subtle undercurrent in the remarks, was about to change the subject tactfully when Staurak arrived bringing refreshments and the good Doctor put in his oar.

"Why is that, Spock? I mean, why must your Council seek out Sradek's expertise? Can't they make up their collective minds as to whether you were right or wrong to take up the challenge?"

"That is precisely the question, Doctor," Spock replied coolly, and took a long swallow of Staurak's special tonic.

His mother was having none of these delaying tactics, and with an authority born of long experience she asked, "Will you please explain, Spock. What happened? Did Shundak not give evidence?"

Spock raised dark, brooding eyes to her face. "Shundak gave evidence, and so did his assistant, but since their testimonies contradict that of Stonn, today's hearing turned into a debate over the logical or illogical significance of my

actions. And so in view of the Councillors' persistent disagreement, Sarek suggested calling in Sradek's expertise."

"In other words," the Captain summed up, "their problem lies in the question of whether you deserve blame for breaking the law in fighting that duel, or praise for sticking to tradition. A pretty quandary for your eminent logicians, isn't it?"

"You know," McCoy declared. "I think it's so damn funny to see these rational Vulcans entangled in their own logic."

Spock favoured the Doctor with a quizzical glance and remarked, "You won't find it so funny tomorrow when you will give evidence to the Council."

"What?" McCoy changed colour. "Do you mean that we have to...?"

"Yes, Doctor, you and Jim are called as witnesses, on T'Pau's recommendation."

"But I don't understand, Spock," Kirk objected. "Only the other day you said that my word, as an Outworlder, has no value here."

"True, Captain, but it concerns T'Pring. You were both present at our encounters and now, as she refuses to make any statement other than persisting in her accusations, T'Pau has proposed hearing your evidence. The Council has agreed to receive your testimony before making a decision and bringing in a verdict. Provided, of course, that you are willing to testify. Since you are not Vulcans you are not compelled to do so."

"I see." Kirk nodded thoughtfully. "T'Pau seems to have made good use of the information we gave her the other night. Very well, Spock, if my evidence is needed I'm ready. What about you, Bones?"

"Me? You bet I'll give my evidence! It's about time to square accounts with that girl. She's been making a nuisance of herself long enough; now it's the time of reckoning."

Wordlessly, Amanda reached out her hand and squeezed the Doctor's but Spock, eyebrows raised in reproof, said sternly,

"Let me point out, Doctor, that what the Council requires is a statement of the truth, not a misguided expression of revenge."

"Oh come off it, Spock! I hope you know me better than that. It's not revenge but plain justice we're talking about, and by god I shall do my best to see it done. Never fear, all I'll tell your blessed Council is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And let me tell you that the naked truth on T'Pring and her schemes is pretty damning as it is."

"Bones has a point there," Kirk said gently. "Since we are called as witnesses, can we do less than tell the facts as we know them? Look, Spock, she had no scruples in planning your undoing through every possible means. Why should we spare her?"

Spock gazed at his Captain with troubled eyes then murmured, "Yes, perhaps you are right, Jim."

"Naturally we're right!" McCoy retorted with spirit. "Don't you fret, Spock - Jim and I know what we're doing."

Amanda, who had followed the discussion attentively, presently said, "Spock, what about Stonn? What does he say about this? After all he was simply a pawn in T'Pring's game. He was shamelessly used. Does he realise that?"

"At the moment he seems unsure, confused, Mother, but I think that he begins to realise the extent of T'Pring's machinations."

Spock's quiet reply drew the dry comment from McCoy, "Confused, is he? No wonder. It's always a shock to find out one has been set up - and by one's bondmate at that."

"What I can't understand," Amanda resumed, "is what was T'Pring's ultimate motive in telling those lies about you, my dear."

The three men looked at her in perplexity, and the Captain said, "But don't you see, Amanda? Her plan was to get Stonn *and* Spock out of the way in one go by provoking that duel to the death."

"I know that, Jim. What I mean is that she must have had a *reason*. Vulcans never do anything without a logical reason."

Instinctively all eyes looked to Spock for an answer. A short tense silence ensued, then the Vulcan, keeping his face carefully expressionless, said, "I know the reason, Mother. T'Pring told me."

Amanda caught her breath then said tightly, "She told you? She had the nerve? When was that?"

His gaze fixed on his clenched hands, Spock said in a toneless voice, "After the combat, on the Ha'aka hills. She was quite frank about it. She said she no longer wanted Stonn, she wanted me, and so, since I had refused to bond with her..." His voice broke off, his words hanging in the silence.

Amanda, blue eyes bright with anger, sat still for a few tense seconds, then she whispered bitterly, "So that was her motive. Revenge. A logical reason indeed. My god, I never thought she could be so

implacable. This is appalling."

"Yes," McCoy nodded wisely, "but not altogether unexpected, nor unprecedented. I mean, the case of T'Pring is a typical illustration of the love/hate syndrome: unrequited love turning into destructive hatred."

Kirk looked sceptical. "Love, Bones? Does T'Pring even know what it means? I rather think that she sought revenge out of spite and frustration. Enraged at seeing her clever plans fall flat, she joined forces with X'Our, the one man on the planet she knew hated Spock."

"Sure, Jim., That comes into the account," the Doctor conceded, "but believe me, hatred of that virulence proceeds, nine times out of ten, from rejected love and/or jealousy. You know how it goes. Er... Hell hath no fury..."

"Not quite, Doctor," said Spock, and he declaimed solemnly, "Heaven hath no rage like love to hatred turned/Nor Hell a fury like a woman scorned.' The Mourning Bride, William Congreve, Earth."

For a few heartbeats all three stared at Spock, then McCoy, feeling that it was high time to cheer up the mood, let out a groan and rolled his eyes skyward.

"Oh lord! I might have known our walking encyclopedia would come up pat with the correct quote. Tell me, Amanda," he stage-whispered, "this habit he has of splashing quotations right and left - is that something inborn, or a trick they taught him at school?"

Grateful for the turn of conversation, Amanda glanced sidelong at her son and replied likewise, "Between you and me, Doctor, it's both. You must blame it on an insatiable curiosity inherited from his father, and on his mother's obsession,

born of a long teaching career, for literary precision."

"Not forgetting hours of homework under your tuition, Mother," Spock remarked pointedly.

"Quite true, my dear," his mother rejoined lightly, "but you must admit that they've not been entirely wasted. See... you are now perfectly able to cite your sources with accuracy."

This proved to be too much for the good Doctor. "Do you mean to say that this kink he has is all your doing?" he asked in awe.

"I'm afraid so," she assented with a sweet smile.

"Why the surprise, Bones?" asked Kirk, much amused. "That is a typical example of 'Like mother, like son', isn't it, Spock?"

"Indeed, Captain," His First Officer solemnly agreed, which earned him a fond smile from Amanda.

"Why Spock, is that recognition of the heritage I gave you?" she asked.

Quite conscious of the grins on his friends' faces Spock replied, at his most Vulcan, "Mother, to deny my Human heritage would be as pointless and illogical as to deny that I am your son."

"It would indeed," she replied softly, then gathering her flowing robes about her she rose gracefully, reminding Kirk of Spock's innate elegance. Apparently it did not come solely from his Vulcan ancestry, and the more he observed mother and son, the more he noticed in the one traits subtly mirrored in the other.

"Much as I enjoy your company," said Amanda, "I had better check with T'Mina

about supper, and perhaps see what Sarek and the Professor are up to." Picking up the tray she turned to go, then paused as a thought crossed her mind. "By the way, has Spock informed you of the Mav'Ikman?" she asked her guests.

Kirk and McCoy exchanged a bemused stare, but Spock replied calmly, "Yes, Mother, I have."

"Because," she continued, "T'Pau called this morning. She said that now that we are back home the ceremony cannot be delayed indefinitely, in which she is quite right. So we shall hold it at the end of the week, as soon as the Council makes a judgement and closed the hearing. It will not interfere with your plans, I hope?"

Three pairs of eyes met, and Spock announced, "Actually, the Captain and Dr McCoy wish to spend a few days at the Tsai-Kai Plantation, but we have not fixed a date yet, so perhaps..."

He looked enquiringly at Kirk, who replied at once, "Sure, we can wait a few days. It doesn't matter."

"Very well, then." Amanda smiled, satisfied. "We shall hold the Mav'Ikman on the fifth day, which gives us just time for preparation."

Amanda was hardly out of earshot when Kirk demanded an explanation. "What's all this, Spock? What's this Mav'Ikman ceremony? You never told us."

"With due respect, Captain, I did. It is the Family Meeting I spoke of on the way here," Spock reminded him.

"Oh, that's what it is. The presentation to the Clan... Yes, now I remember," Kirk admitted. "Sorry, Spock, but what with your heroics and those warriors, it just

slipped my mind."

"Quite understandable, Jim," murmured the Vulcan, but McCoy was not satisfied.

"That's all very well," he declared, "But is we must be introduced with pomp and circumstance, I want to know more about this Clan of yours, Spock. Will they all attend? And how many are there, approximately. Do you know?"

"Approximately, Doctor? So far as I recall, at the last census the Clan totalled 4,692 individuals. In ShiKahr and the neighbouring districts, however, the number comes down to 164, or perhaps 165 since our cousin T'Tal is expecting a birth at any moment, I was told. But surely my father could give more accurate information since he keeps all the Family records."

Both Humans gave him a stunned look, then Kirk chuckled. "Spock, you can't be serious... Yes, of course you are. Sorry for asking," he hastily amended, transfixed by an affronted look.

"Of course he's not!" McCoy challenged. "Don't you see that he's pulling our legs, Jim?"

"Pull your legs, Doctor?" a disdainful Vulcan shot back. "Why should I? Most improper!"

"Oh, knock it off, you silly Vulcan. You know damn well what I mean! Seriously, though, do you really have... How many? Four thousand six hundred relatives?"

"Four thousand six hundred and ninety-two. Yes, Doctor," Spock said stiffly.

"Heavens! And do we have to meet them all?"

This provoked a sardonic retort. "Do try to be logical for once, McCoy. How could they possibly all gather here within a few days, especially as many live far away?"

"Thank goodness for small favours!" breathed the Doctor.

"I must admit that I feel rather like Bones does at the idea of being introduced to a whole Clan," Kirk put in. "But I am impressed, compared to the few relatives I have left."

"There is no comparison, Jim," Spock explained. "A Family here is a Clan whose origin can be traced back to the Pre-Reform Age, and whose members claim the same ancestor at about Surak's time."

"I see," Kirk nodded. "And at the moment T'Pau is Head of your Clan, with Sarek as second in command, am I right?"

"Exactly, Jim. Although important questions concerning the Clan are often debated at the Council of the Elders, the final decision falls to T'Pau, or to my father. Now, if you will excuse me..." Spock stood up and made to leave, but a loud protest from McCoy brought him up short.

"Hey, just a minute! Won't you tell us about that ceremony? I mean... What will we have to do, or say, or whatever?"

"You must ask Sarek, Doctor. So far as I know you won't have to say anything. Just do as you are told, that is all."

McCoy breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank god! I was afraid Jim would be expected to make a speech."

"A speech? In Vulcanur? Heaven forbid!" Kirk exclaimed. "But what about clothes, Spock? Dress uniform, or

civvies?"

"Dress uniform would not be appropriate, and would be uncomfortable, since the gathering takes place at the Ar-Elak'Ksar. But better check with my parents." Taking his leave the Vulcan strode back to the house, followed by the glare of a nonplussed Human.

"The what? What did he say, Jim?"

"No idea, Bones, but never mind - we'll find out in due time," Kirk said easily as he pulled himself to his feet.

"Are you leaving too?" asked McCoy, stretching lazily.

"I'll be right back. Just going to change for a swim."

CHAPTER 3

As the drone of the air-car was abruptly switched off the Lady Amanda carefully folded her needlework and multi-coloured skeins of wool and put them away in the wooden chest which stood by her chair. She meant it to be a surprise for her son, and worked in secrecy at the tapestry emblazoned with the Family crest, a le-matya rampant of sable and gules on a field silver and azur.

Anxious to hear the outcome of the day's hearing she quickly left her sitting room and was crossing the hall when simultaneously Staurak appeared with the traditional drinks for the newcomers, and the back door opened, admitting Captain Kirk and Dr McCoy escorted by her husband.

Silently Staurak handed each a frosted glass and discreetly vanished while Amanda looked at Sarek, who responded with a reassuring nod.

"Well, gentlemen," she asked her guests, "what did you think of your experience of a Vulcan enquiry?"

"Very interesting," replied Kirk, sipping his drink with relish. "As expected, we were invited to tell them what we knew of the case, and without presumption I believe that our evidence made some impression."

"I agree, Captain," Sarek said. "Your testimony has thrown a new light on this affair. Yours in particular, Kirk, as it fully corroborates the evidence given by Shundak."

"Then you think that Spock has a good chance of being vindicated?" Amanda asked hopefully.

"I am not in a position to presume on the Council's decision, my wife," Sarek replied in mild reproof, "but I cannot deny that what we heard today is quite conclusive which, all things considered, augurs well for our son."

"I should think so!" interjected McCoy. "I tell you, if those judges of yours don't clear Spock of all blame after the home truths Sradek delivered, then there's not much to say for their precious logic. With all due respect, Ambassador," he added with an apologetic grin at the sight of Sarek's raised eyebrow.

"Really?" Amanda's eyes widened in surprise. "What did he tell them?"

"I'm afraid it would take too long to tell the whole story," said the Captain, "but your professor is certainly not a man to mince his words. He concluded his statement by advising the Council to make up their minds once and for all. Either have Vulcans abide by the teachings of Surak, or have them follow the warriors' traditions. But they couldn't have it both ways. Logical, isn't it?"

"Dear old Sradek - always the non-conformist." Amanda looked pleased. "Sarek, what do you think?"

"I admit that Sradek's conclusion may be the logical answer to the dilemma we are faced with. A decision must be made as to which must take precedence, the Law of Surak or the traditions, a decision of considerable consequence indeed. However, conjecture is pointless at the moment, Amanda; we must await the verdict with serenity. In the meantime you may be interested to view this tape; it is the record of the hearings. I thought it ought to be kept in the Family Archives."

"You thought well, my dear. Thank you," his wife replied with a fond smile.

Sarek inclined his head, and walking to his study announced, "Also, we have a guest at dinner. Professor Sradek accepted my invitation." He paused, a hand on the door knob, and turned. "I hope that you do not mind?" he asked as an afterthought.

"Not at all, I am delighted," she said lightly, "because I also have invited guests tonight."

"Oh, indeed?"

"Yes, dear. T'Lian and T'Kahalin are coming to dinner. I hope *you* don't mind?" she asked sweetly.

Something unspoken passed between them, after which Sarek replied gravely, "No, my wife, you did well." Then he made a dignified retreat into his den and closed the door firmly behind him.

Amanda, a satisfied smile on her lips, turned round and at the sight of her guests' appreciative grins asked in jest, "And I hope that you two don't mind having Vulcans at dinner?"

"We shall be delighted, Amanda," McCoy drawled. "The company of pretty women is always a delight, isn't it, Jim?"

"Absolutely! And I shall be glad to further my acquaintance with the Lady T'Kahalin, all in a good cause," he added with a wink. "By the way, do you know where Spock is?"

"Spock? Well when I saw him last he was in the arbour playing the storyteller."

"The what? Oh, I see - the kids from next door," Kirk grinned. "Well, it's quite a story that we can tell him. Coming, Bones?"

"Out there, in that heat? No, thank you. No more for now." McCoy pulled himself to his feet and made for the stairs. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll have a shower and a nap before lunch."

"And perhaps a mint julep, Doctor?" suggested a new voice.

"Bless you, Staurak! Yeah, that would be just right."

"I shall take it up to your room, sir."

"Thank you," the Doctor mumbled, already halfway up.

"Well, since McCoy is out of action for the present, I'll go and find Spock," Kirk decided. "With your permission, Amanda?"

"Of course," she smiled in return. "Only... don't tell Spock that we have ladies at dinner, will you?"

An impish grin lit up the Captain's face. "Of course not. Surprise is essential in shock tactics, Amanda, didn't you know?" Crossing the gallery he soon disappeared behind the mass of climbers

hanging from the arcades.

The torrid heat hit Kirk like a sledgehammer once he was in the open, but curiously it didn't feel as overpowering as it had in the first days, proof that one gets used to everything, even the Vulcan climate. Having refreshed himself at the ever-flowing cascade he went in search of the arbour, whatever that meant. Taking care to stay well within the shade of the trees, Kirk followed a winding path through some shrubbery, and finally caught the distant sound of voices.

As he drew near he easily identified the children's piping voices in contrast to the deep and so-familiar tones of his First Officer. He moved on cautiously, not a little curious to hear the kind of yarn Spock was telling the children, but he soon realised that they were speaking Vulcanur, naturally. So much for eavesdropping! He pushed his way between two thick clumps of evergreen - after making sure neither belonged to the spiky variety - and at last came into sight of the arbour, a pergola-gazebo type of construction made of intertwined lattices to judge by what was visible under the profusion of fragrant climbers.

Looking for the entrance, Kirk made his way quietly around, and on hearing Spock unfold his tale behind a screen of foliage it suddenly occurred to him that Vulcanur was a rather musical language when spoken with such elegant diction. Unfortunately, apart from learning a few essential words, Kirk had never found the time to learn the language, and with universal translators at hand, one tended to become lazy. Too bad he had left his in the house.

Well, if eavesdropping was out of the question, perhaps a peep was possible, and he would give a lot to catch Spock unaware. Kirk pushed aside some of the

creepers and took a peep through the gap. It was well worth it. In the blueish light filtering through the leaves Seric and his little sister sat cross-legged on the sand, their rapt gazes fixed on the story teller. Spock, hands clasped about a knee, was sitting at ease on the wooden seat which ran round the arbour. At their feet was spread out what looked at first sight like a brown shaggy rug, but to judge by the rhythmic rumbling escaping from it, it must be the inescapable sehlat indulging, like McCoy, in a little siesta.

This charming scene, conjuring a studious classroom, brought a smile to the Captain's lips, the more so since the serious expressions of teacher and pupils contrasted curiously with their casual attire. Kirk had noticed with approval the sensible way that Vulcans dressed their children, short pants for boys, tunics for girls, secured with shoulder straps. Adult fashion, on the other hand, was more diversified, and could on occasion be extraordinarily ornate and sophisticated. Kirk had, for instance, seldom seen anyone as regally imposing as Sarek in full ambassador's robes.

But today Spock had chosen casual clothes more appropriate for home, a knee-length sleeveless tunic of white homespun secured by an indigo belt; through the open sides of the tunic could be seen the indigo blue of the briefs. This simple attire, together with the light sandals on his feet, concealed little of Spock's slim figure, but as always he managed to appear as neat as a new pin. That was a trait his Captain envied, he whose clothes often came off the worse for wear, as the amazing quantity of uniforms he ruined could attest.

Suddenly Spock stopped in mid-sentence, the sehlat blinked open a pair of golden eyes, and they all looked in Kirk's direction.

Damn! he thought. *You can't fool those Vulcan ears.*

Rising ponderously on its forelegs the sehlat emitted a warning growl which Spock stopped short with a brief command. Then he called out,

"Won't you join us, Jim? The entrance is on this side."

Well, Kirk thought wryly, *rather try and catch a cat napping than a Vulcan unaware,* and he skirted the arbour.

A little while later, after a memorable interview with Captain Kirk, the children took their leave and, sehlat in tow, went back home the way they had come, through the gap in the fence which had become by mutual agreement their private short-cut from one domain to the other.

"Nice kids," Kirk commented as he watched them run through the copse of flamboyants, "and surprisingly good at speaking Federation Standard. they're so young. Do they teach languages that early in your schools?"

"Yes, quite early," Spock replied, folding his hands. "However, those children have an advantage over their classmates, my mother's teaching experience and proximity."

"Ah yes," Kirk smiled. "Once a teacher, always a teacher, eh? But," he turned and tilted his head at his companion, "you're not doing so badly with teaching yourself, Spock," he teased. "What epic was it today? Our dealings with the Romulans? Or perhaps that memorable encounter with the Organians and the Klingons?"

Spock sought help from the ceiling, then looked down at his clasped hands; for some reason he looked embarrassed.

"I am afraid," he said finally, "that their interest today was not so much about the Enterprise as about Stonn's challenge and the D'Alik'Tal."

"Why Spock, you can't blame them, can you?" Kirk laughed softly. "I'm sure your exploits have been the nine days wonder over the whole of ShiKahr. It's not surprising then that they've fired the imaginations of those kids. Just think what it means for them. I know that in their place I wouldn't miss the chance to hear of my hero's deeds at first hand."

"But you are Human, Jim, and they are not. They should have had more restraint. This excitement over what was but a glorified bloodshed is unhealthy and unethical," Spock remonstrated firmly.

"Spock!" Kirk protested. "They're only children. Don't you realise that you're in a fair way to becoming a living legend for Vulcan youths? And don't tell me it's illogical, please. there's nothing wrong with a little hero-worship. Well," he amended in view of a disapproving eyebrow, "so long as the object is worthy and sets an acceptable example to future generations. Don't you agree?"

Kirk's twinkling eyes and quizzical smile won a reluctant nod from his friend, who still looked troubled, however.

"All the same, Jim, I would prefer it otherwise. I do believe that it is wrong to be the focus of so much attention."

"Would you rather be ostracized, as when you were a child?" Kirk countered. "You are accepted now; you're even becoming a celebrity. Well then, who not accept it logically? There's nothing you can do about it, anyway."

The Vulcan looked at his Captain with darkening eyes. "Jim, I don't thing you

fully understand the situation. Vulcans abhor violence in all its forms, therefore logically they cannot accept what I have done, and the Judicial Council has every reason to condemn my actions. No, listen, Jim. The fact remains that I took up Stonn's challenge. I fought the duel. Furthermore, I could have killed him in the heat of the fight. Do you realise that I was ready to kill, Jim?"

"Yes, but you didn't. That's just it. You... *did*... *not*. You refused to give him the finishing stroke, and *that*, my friend, makes all the difference. And you know something? I'm pretty sure that the Council will take that into account. Logically, they must."

"The Council will judge my case on facts, Jim, not on emotional considerations," Spock stated flatly.

"Okay. But common sense will prevail because they can't ignore your Professor Sradek's arguments. I'm sure his statement will carry weight with their decision," Kirk said confidently, adding with a lopsided smile, "and you must admit that if there's one thing Sradek can't be blamed for, it's emotional considerations."

"I admit that, but... could you be more specific, Jim? What did Sradek see?" Spock could hardly contain his curiosity.

"Well for one thing, he declared that to require from Vulcans the strict observance of such contradictory concepts as the teachings of Surak and the warriors' traditions was the height of nonsense."

"Oh?" Spock's eyebrow rocketed skyward. "Sradek said that?"

"He did, and much more of the same," Kirk said smugly, and he proceeded to relate the gist of Sradek's momentous

statement. "Incidentally, your father had it all recorded, and I'll be that Amanda is watching the full report of our evidence by now - and that, I hope, should raise his spirits because she looked quite worried when we came in."

A soft sigh, quickly suppressed, came from Spock. "Yes," he said sombrely. "It is regrettable, but unfortunately inevitable. Being Human, my mother cannot help showing her concern over this case."

Kirk stared in disbelief, then broke into laughter. "My word, Spock, are you trying to find excuses for Amanda being worried sick about you? Don't you know it's just a normal Human reaction?"

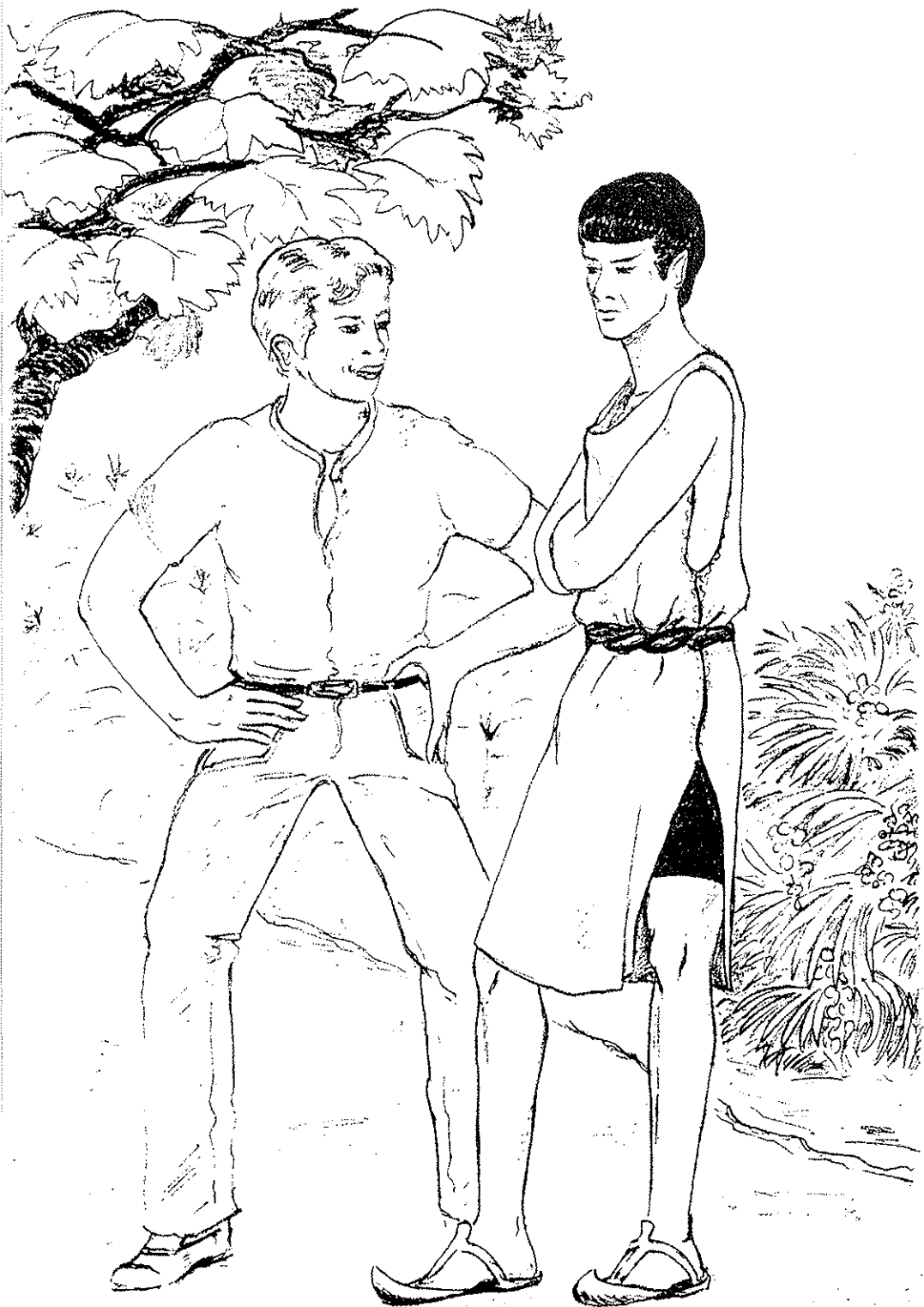
"I know, Jim, but I fail to see what purpose it serves to indulge in that depressing emotion, since it cannot change the issue."

Kirk shrugged. "I agree," he conceded. "It's pointless, but what do you expect? It's a Human failing. And you know what?" A mischievous grin spread over his face. "I do believe that you, my Vulcan friend, are not entirely immune to that failing. Come on, Spock, tell me true - in your heart of hearts, aren't you a little bit concerned?"

Caught off guard, Spock assumed his best 'affronted' look, but challenged by Kirk's daring stare he paused and engaged in a swift introspection. Then, shaking his head, he returned Kirk's gaze steadily and replied simply, "Honestly, Jim, I find no trace of anxiety in my mind, only curiosity over the Council's final decision, together with a certain degree of fatalism. There is nothing I can do about it, so 'Hak'Tuvar'Shun', as the saying goes."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning something like 'What will



be, will be'."

"Ah!" Kirk grinned, and began humming off key, "Che sara, sara; Whatever will be, will be..."

"Captain!"

"Sorry, Spock. Just reminded me of a very, very old song that my mother used to sing at home. We have much the same maxim on Earth, with the difference that we seldom put it into practice. We can't manage the Vulcan detachment, as you know. Ah well, nobody's perfect." he stood up, stretched, and said with a hand on his stomach, "I've a feeling right here that it's not far from lunchtime. What about you?"

Spock nodded assent. "Another 8.2 minutes, Jim."

"Then I'd better go and drag McCoy out of his beauty sleep." He walked away, calling over his shoulder, "Coming, Spock?"

CHAPTER 4

Eridani sent a last flash of light over ShiKahr before sinking below the horizon. the sky turned from scarlet to a ruby glow which slowly deepened into the violet hue of the Vulcan twilight. The air burned still, but already a gentle breeze, rustling about the garden city, heralded the night wind of the desert.

In Sarek's house the evening meal was over and the company was sitting on the patio drinking coffee and tea, a ritual introduced from Terra by the Lady Amanda. Dr McCoy relaxed and warmed a balloon of Sarek's brandy in the cup of his hand. He listened with half an ear to the conversation while his keen blue eyes observed the group of people gathered around the coffee table. An entertaining

exercise, to judge by the slow smile playing about his lips.

Directly across from him Amanda, a vision of lavender and silver chiffon, officiated with her usual gracious attentiveness. Sitting next to her, Professor Sradek, whose spare frame seemed lost in the depths of his chair, clutched one of Amanda's precious china cups in his wrinkled hands and made no bones about his views on the matter uppermost in their minds.

It was strange how, despite the Vulcans' reluctance to speculate, that subject kept recurring in the conversation.

From her comments Healer T'Lian obviously disapproved of the warriors' rituals, but then she was a doctor, not a Valkyrie. A remarkable lady, regal in her black and saffron robes adorned with gems and the symbols of her calling, she was as gifted in looks as in intellect.

The same applied to her niece. McCoy's eyes swept on and dwelt with pleasure on the striking beauty of T'Kahalin, all grace and elegance in a silky flowing affair of jade green and turquoise. She seemed content to just listen and sip her tea, her lovely face quietly attentive, but under her aloof serenity the astute physician detected something like a secret elation, an exultation that shone in her eyes.

Careful, pretty lady! McCoy chuckled inwardly. Your reputation might suffer if you let those green eyes of yours betray your feelings. So much for unemotional Vulcans! Unemotional fiddlesticks! Granted, you have every reason to rejoice. Spock is sitting less than two metres away from you, and is relatively unscathed. An amazing stroke of luck, considering that he might well have been killed by that gang of warriors.

"I don't know if you realise, but you literally took his breath away when you came in with T'Lian for dinner. Surprise, surprise! I've never seen him so moved before, though he covered it fast enough behind that poker face. But the look he gave you! Ye gods, wasn't that something? I'm sure Amanda noticed - she couldn't miss how your eyes met and locked across the room. That must've pleased her no end. But what's that crazy Vulcan up to now, pretending indifference? He'll have Jim stealing a march on him before he knows it. Come on, lady, why don't you give him a lead."

As if on cue T'kahalin leaned forward and set down her cup on the marble table. In doing so she stole a glance in the direction of Spock, who sat quietly on Kirk's other side, saying little as usual. her move at once caught his attention, and their eyes met and held for a few heartbeats which seemed an eternity. Abruptly she dropped her gaze and sat back, thus disappearing behind the Captain's solid frame.

The scene had not been lost on the watchful Doctor, who laughed up his sleeve at seeing Spock's features quickly resume their customary composure. *Spock, you fool, that Vulcan pose isn't a bit of use. You give yourself away every time she looks at you. When are you going to face the facts, dammit?*

Suddenly Sarek's voice broke in on his thoughts. "... and I suppose that Dr McCoy has strong views on the matter, have you not, Doctor?" the Ambassador was saying, a gleam in his eyes.

"Uh... strong views? Er..." Caught off guard, McCoy fumbled and, playing for time, gulped down some brandy while wondering what the heck he was supposed to have views about.

Unexpectedly, T'Lian got him out of his plight by saying quietly, "I am aware of Dr McCoy's views, and I find them

entirely justified, Sarek." She looked at her host. "With due respect to the Clan and to our traditions, I think something must be done to put a stop to these combats from times long past. I tell you, I no longer want to see in my ward young men hacked to the bone for the sake of some perverted code of honour. No Healer can countenance such appalling practices, such illogical waste of life. Don't you agree, McCoy?"

"Oh, absolutely!" McCoy said emphatically. "You and I are of the same mind on that subject, T'Lian. No physician worth his salt could approve of these bloodshedding heroics. The curious thing is that each of us, in our own sphere of activity, is faced with the same recurrent problem. Yours, on Vulcan, arises from what you aptly call 'a perverted code of honour'; mine, in Starfleet, proceeds more often than not from the stubborn and overzealous sense of duty of certain officers - naming no names. Situation apparently different, same result: all we have left is to try and repair the damage."

In the ensuing silence a murmur of agreement ran around the company. Kirk met his First Officer's eyes and chuckled good-humouredly.

"Really, Bones," he said, "I wish you'd keep things in proportion. Sorry, but you can't compare our duty to Starfleet and that of a Vulcan to the Ancient Laws. And you paint the situation blacker than it is. Our life out in space isn't half as dangerous as you would like our friends here to believe, is it, Spock?"

"Agreed, Captain," was Spock's cool reply. "Dr McCoy's assertions are grossly exaggerated, which is not surprising given his noted propensity for melodramatics."

That was too much for McCoy.

"Melodramatics?" he protested hotly. "You ungrateful so-and-so! What about the uncounted hours I've spent in Sickbay patching up the two of you and trying to keep you alive? Is that melodramatic, I ask you?"

Actually the Doctor's emotional outburst fooled no-one, not even the Vulcans, who had begun to size up the true nature of the grumpy Human by now.

Least of all Spock, who pursued the argument with maddening calm. "Do not misunderstand me, Doctor. Your efficiency as Chief Surgeon has never been questioned. That is not the point."

"And what is the point, if I may ask?" demanded McCoy, the light of battle in his eyes.

"Simply that you have mistakenly put the Warriors' Code of Honour and the Federation Code of Duty on the same level. That is an error. They have nothing in common."

"Oh yeah?" drawled the Doctor. "Maybe I'm dumb, but I can't see the difference between a wounded Vulcan in my Sickbay and a wounded Vulcan in T'Lian's intensive care ward. And to quote a certain Science Officer, 'a difference which makes no difference is no difference.' How's that for logic, Mr Spock?" And, blue eyes twinkling with triumphant glee, McCoy folded his arms and sat back in his chair, obviously settling in for a lengthy argument.

But it was not to be. Before Spock could launch one of his stinging replies everyone's attention was drawn to the Lady Amanda, who delicately cleared her throat then said,

"Spock, dear, I hate to spoil your fun and meddle in your debate, but I think

that Leonard has a valid point there."

A lofty eyebrow rose fractionally and Spock's tone expressed polite disbelief. "Oh do you, Mother?"

"Yes. You see, it is simply a matter of perspective. You men are committed to duty, and naturally must see to it that it is done, regardless of the consequences; which is precisely what our Healers here have to deal with - appalling consequences sometimes. And in view of the recent events which nearly cost you your life, I fully endorse their opinion that the price to pay is much too high. I know, dear," she gave her son a fond smile, "that is an emotional reaction, but that is what your mother feels on the subject."

Their eyes met in a long gaze of understanding, then Spock inclined his head and said quietly, "Point taken, Mother."

Upon which the Doctor was heard to mutter, with a smug grin on his face, "And about time, Spock!", while the Lady T'Kahalin said clearly, "We agree with you, Amanda."

Jim Kirk, hazel eyes a-crinkle in a smile, spread his hands and said, "Well, Spock, if the ladies are now taking sides with the opposition, what can we do but yield with a good grace. Are you satisfied, Doctor?"

McCoy gave a snort. "No don't get me wrong, Jim. I've never questioned your duty, and I never will, whatever I might feel about it. We all have our own duties. I only wish, if it's not asking too much, that you and Spock would curb that propensity for rushing in where angels fear to tread."

A discreet movement of curiosity stirred in the Vulcan guests, but

Ambassador Sarek merely commented, "In interesting metaphor, Doctor, and one well adapted to the matter under discussion, but I think we can close the subject for the present." He stood up and offered Amanda his hand. "I believe our guests expressed the wish to see your roses, my wife. Are you not prone to say that they are at their best at nightfall?"

Amanda rose and touched Sarek's paired fingers. "They are indeed. Their fragrance is always more perceptible with the evening breeze." She looked invitingly at her guests. "Ladies, Professor? Would you care for a walk in the garden?"

"By all means," Sradek replied readily as he got to his feet with Spock's help. "What greater satisfaction to the intellect than an interesting discussion followed by the contemplation of roses? And," he peered up at Spock, "that was certainly a lively debate that you had with the Doctor, my boy. Quite stimulating indeed."

On the way to the garden Amanda looked back at her son. "Spock," she said, "I think I left my woollen wrap in the lounge. Would you, please?"

Spock silently assented and was turning back when T'Kahalin's voice made him pause.

"I don't quite understand," she was saying in a puzzled tone. "This concept of angels is new to me. Would you please explain? What exactly are angels?"

Before any of the Humans could produce an answer Spock came out with the information. "Angels are celestial entities, T'Kahalin. They originate in ancient Terran mythologies, and are usually fitted with one or several pairs of wings."

"Indeed? Then they must be similar to

the Csotxk of our legends, I suppose," she suggested.

"Yes, in so far as angels are generally believed to be emissaries of the deities, and are endowed with supernatural powers. The great difference, however, lies in the fact that the Csotxk of our traditions are definitely male creatures, while the gender of angels has never been specified and has therefore been, over the centuries, the subject of endless debates among dogmatists of all sects."

"How strange!" said T'Kahalin, struck by the idea. "How could they waste time debating on legendary beings?"

"Probably because the futility of such a pointless dispute never occurred to them," Spock replied. "Once, the controversy reached such a point that the religious authorities of the capital town of the Byzantian Empire were still arguing endlessly over the sex of angels while their city was being besieged by invading forces."

"Really? And what happened?" she asked, obviously shocked.

"The town fell to the enemy, was looted and taken over, as was to be expected, but to my knowledge the crucial question of whether non-existent entities are male or female has never been satisfactorily settled." Spock paused, then raising a questioning eyebrow at his grinning friends, who could no longer keep straight faces on hearing the two Vulcans solemnly discussing angels, said, "Captain? Is something the matter? Is my explanation inexact, perhaps?"

"On the contrary, Mr Spock," Kirk replied, "you are as always a mine of information. But I hope you won't be offended if I say that it is not quite complete. You see," he flashed his most radiant smile at T'Kahalin, "I happen to

be an expert on angels, and if you care to hear my version I could tell you... Come, let's join the others." Deftly steering the Vulcan girl towards the path he went on, "Yes, contrary to Spock's theory, angels exist. I've met them. Guardian angels, for instance..." His voice faded in the distance and they disappeared from view while a bemused Vulcan remained rooted to the spot.

Actually Spock was fighting a sudden and disturbing emotion when a dry chuckle behind him brought him back to reality and to the presence of Dr McCoy, who was regarding him with an ironic expression.

"Masterly, wasn't it, Spock? But then, there's no beating Jim when it comes to charming a lady - even a Vulcan lady. Too bad, though. He stole your show. Tut, tut, tut." McCoy was shaking his head with mock sympathy when he found himself pinned by a Vulcan glare.

"My show, Doctor?" Spock's voice was tightly controlled. "I don't see what you mean, and I have no time for your absurd comments. If you will excuse me, my mother has need of her wrap." And turning on his heel, Spock strode stiffly back to the house.

"Uh-oh!" muttered McCoy. "Looks like our agent provocateur is producing some effect after all."

Deep in thought the Doctor sauntered past the pool towards the rose garden, his path brightly lit by footlights which sprang into life as he walked. By now he and Kirk had got to know Spock's family well, but they were still amused at seeing the Enterprise's First Officer running errands, like a mere cabin boy, for his mother. They could not help but admire the supreme ease with which Amanda handled her two solemn Vulcans.

When Sarek, for instance, claimed his rights as a Vulcan consort Amanda granted them willingly, but precisely when *she* chose to do so. As for Spock, any observer could tell how much, despite his aloof manner, he loved his Human mother. Vulcan ways or not, this charming and frail-looking woman reigned with gracious authority over her household. A remarkable lady.

The lady in question was proudly showing the visitors her roses in the amber glow of the garden lights when a warm shawl was lightly dropped across her shoulders. Pulling it close about her she smiled up at her son.

"Thank you, my dear," she said, then nodding in Kirk's direction she said pointedly, "If you're looking for Jim, he's over there."

And indeed when Spock looked round there was his Captain making a long arm and gingerly pulling down a branch of rambling roses for T'Kahalin's inspection. She put up both hands to cup a bunch of creamy yellow roses and leaned close to smell their scent, thus affording such a pleasing spectacle that, curiously, Spock felt a tightness somewhere in his chest.

Drawing in a long breath to dispel the odd sensation he slowly walked over to Kirk, who exclaimed at the sight of him, "Ah here, you are, Spock. What kept you so long?"

Slightly put out by his Captain's curious attitude Spock chose to ignore him and turned his attention to the young woman whose luminous eyes had the uncanny power of luring him into their depths. Firmly resisting their spell he kept his voice carefully neutral as he said, "I trust that your curiosity has been satisfied, T'Kahalin, and that Captain Kirk has given you full information on angels, archangels and the like?"

"Yes, he did," she replied quietly. "He told me who guardian angels really are."

"Oh, indeed?" Spock hesitated, sensing some double entendre in her words. But was it that telling glow in her golden-green eyes, the tone of her voice, or perhaps that knowing grin on Jim's face? Whatever it was Spock could not, did not, resist any more. All trace of resentment he might illogically have felt faded into nothingness, and something warm and strangely pleasant touched him deep inside. His dark eyes softened as he gazed down at her and replied gravely, "I see," although he sounded as if he did not see anything at all except the beautiful face turned up to him.

CHAPTER 5

The verdict fell like a blow in the silence of the courtroom.

"It is the judgement of the Council that X'Our and his partisans are guilty of all the offences with which they have been charged. Consequently, they are sentenced to the deprivation of Vulcan citizenship, and to exile for the remainder of their lives. Furthermore," the impassive voice continued, "it is the recommendation of the Council that the Lla-Hanak Brotherhood, also guilty of the aforementioned crimes, be definitely dissolved. It is so ordered, and so it shall be!"

A faint whisper rustled in the Hall of the Judicial Council. It was packed with kinsmen of the accused, witnesses, and members of the High Council, all sitting on the banks of seats around three sides of the Hall.

From his vantage point in one of the upper galleries Kirk could see the five accused standing in front of the podium on which the green-robed judges sat in

state. The lights from the wooden ceiling turned the Vulcans' faces into tragic masks devoid of any emotion. Vulcan self-control at its most awesome.

He leaned towards Amanda and whispered, "A very definite judgement, don't you think? I guess the Council wants to make an example of these men."

Amanda nodded. "Yes, it looks like it," she said.

"Well let's hope they've not decided to make an example of Spock as well," McCoy muttered from the other side.

Amanda sighed. "We shall know soon enough, Doctor," she said, and cast an anxious glance at her son, who stood wrapped in impenetrable reserve on one side of the court. Opposite him Stonn was leaning on a walking stick and studiously ignoring his D'Alik'Tal opponent.

Kirk, following her gaze, looked at the cloaked figure of a woman standing a few steps behind Stonn. "T'Pring, I presume?" he murmured.

Amanda nodded assent, and watched with mixed feelings the woman who had caused so much havoc and pain around her.

Meantime the five convicts were being escorted out by the officers of the Court, but as they drew level with Spock X'Our halted abruptly and threw him a glare of such hatred that the watchful Humans froze in awe.

"What the hell?" growled McCoy under his breath.

Seconds passed in a heavy silence as the two Vulcans faces each other, eyes locked in an implacable stare, then pushing forwards X'Our spoke loud and clear for all to hear.

"Yes, Spock, you win, you miserable half-breed! You win today, but mark my words - the time will come when you and your... Clan will pay for this! You damn... You are not fit to live!"

Amanda, white as a sheet, pressed her hands to her face, while from the audience below rose a confused murmur which grew and reverberated around the Hall, to climax finally in an unprecedented uproar of protest. Simultaneously the guards tried to move the convicts along; people rose in outrage; and Sarek, his face taut with righteous wrath, strode forward to stand at his son's side.

"Provost!" he thundered over the clamour. "I protest! On behalf of my son and of my Clan, I demand reparation for these insults. I demand that -"

"Who are you, Sarek, to demand anything?" X'Our cut him short, eyes blazing with a fanatic fire. "You and your Clan disgraced yourselves when you brought an Off-worlder into our midst! You have soiled the purity of the Vulcan race by letting your blood mingle with alien blood. You and your hybrid offspring here have brought shame on our people. Because of the likes of you, Sarek, Vulcans have lost the true spirit of our warrior forebears, and have turned to alien ways. You have forsaken our superior race, you have -"

"Kroykah!" the harsh command rang out, followed by deafening bangs of the judicial staff on the flagstones. "Enough!" The Council Head was now on his feet, tensed with anger.

Having obtained silence he coldly proceeded, "Shame on you, X'Our! This scene is disgraceful and dishonours our Court. Officers! Take these men away, and see to it that the sentence is carried out without delay."

By now the commotion had subsided into a shocked silence and the five men, after a last challenging look at Spock and Sarek, were led out of the Hall, which echoed with a hollow sound when the heavy doors slammed shut behind them.

After a suitable pause the Provost resumed, "Sarek, we share your indignation. But the case has been judged; X'Our and his partisans have received the supreme penalty. His Clan is discredited, his Brotherhood is disbanded. What more can be done to compensate for the outrage done to your kin?"

Sarek drew in a deep breath, looked at Spock, who had maintained a dignified silence throughout the incident, then once again in full control of himself replied calmly, "Nothing more, Provost Stravos. I duly acknowledge the soundness of your decision. I only trust that the Council will evince the same clear-mindedness when they pass sentence on my son."

"We will, Sarek, rest easy on that matter. We will."

"I rely on your wisdom, Stravos," Sarek replied with a slight bow.

After conferring briefly with his colleagues the Provost proclaimed, "The Council will take a twenty minute recess - but let no-one leave the precincts," he warned sternly, his eyes on some enterprising alien pressmen who had rushed to the exits. Having re-established order to his satisfaction, Stravos stepped down and glided towards the elderly Vulcan lady who had watched the scene in austere impassivity.

Meantime Amanda, still pale from shock, slowly released her breath. A hand was laid on her arm, and a pair of keen blue eyes regarded her.

"Are you all right?" the Doctor asked

kindly.

She nodded with a smile, not trusting her voice.

"I'll go and get you a drink," said Kirk, standing up. "I think we could all do with one."

Moments later he was back with three tall glasses of fruit juice. "No doubt a 'Staurak Special' would do better, but they don't seem to have it here," he remarked in jest.

"This is perfect. Thank you, Jim." Amanda gratefully sipped her drink.

The Doctor, in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere, said, "You know, those guys who always rant about emotionless, computerised Vulcans... Well, they should spend some time in these Judicial Courts - that would make them change their tune real fast."

"Look who's talking!" Kirk protested. "Who's constantly riling my First Officer for being a heartless, pointy-eared computer, eh, Bones?"

"That's different, Jim. It's for his own good, and he knows it too. Why, he'd think something was seriously wrong with me if I *didn't* taunt him now and then," McCoy retorted. "Seriously, though, who would've thought that Vulcans could blow their tops as they did just now! Even Sarek. My word, what a show. He was magnificent. I never thought he had it in him."

"Vulcans are creatures of passions, Leonard, for all their mastery at controlling them," Amanda reminded him.

"You're telling me!" he grinned. "But how come Spock didn't turn a hair? I was watching him, as stone-faced and

inscrutable as T'Pol, and after all, he was the first concerned. Why didn't he join in the fray?"

"He could not, Doctor," Amanda told him.

Both men looked at her. "What do you mean, he could not?" McCoy asked.

"Spock is committed to silence as long as he stands accused and awaits a verdict, and so are Stonn and T'Pol. They must not speak. That is the law," Amanda quietly explained.

"I'll be damned!" was all McCoy found to say, but Kirk, realising what it had cost his friend to keep his self-control in the face of such deliberate provocation, said tightly,

"And X'Pol, damn him, took advantage of that law to abuse Spock publicly. He knew that Spock could not reply."

"Precisely, Jim, and that is why Sarek intervened," Amanda put in.

"But," said McCoy, his eyes on the Hall below, "if Spock is bound to silence, how come he and Sarek are talking just now?"

"They are not, Leonard," said Amanda. "Look again."

Intrigued, they watched father and son, who were standing shoulder to shoulder. Then the Captain caught on. "I know - a mind link."

"Yes. Jim. The parental bond. It is permitted."

"That's neat!" McCoy declared appreciatively. "So they can communicate without interference, even in a room full of telepaths?"

"There are appropriate techniques," she replied simply.

"Really? Well, speaking of interference, my translator seems to have developed a glitch. Some blanks were left in what that fanatic said. What exactly did he say to Spock to cause such a hullabaloo?"

A faint blush suffused Amanda's cheeks. After some hesitation she replied grimly. "I cannot tell you. The profanities he uttered are simply untranslatable. Believe me, it is better that way. How he dared!" she whispered, taut with anger.

"Sorry," McCoy said hastily. "I shouldn't've asked. Stupid of me."

"No, Doctor," Amanda sighed. "You could not know that a Vulcan could stoop so low."

"Well, seems to me that lots of Vulcans are behaving out of character right now," the Doctor commented dryly. Then seeing an abstracted expression cross her face he asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Hmmm? Oh no, on the contrary," she said, a secret smile on her lips. "I just had a message from my husband. He is reasonably optimistic." Then at their obvious surprise she explained, "Sarek and I are bonded, you know, and we share our thoughts. The marital link, if you like."

"I see," Kirk said with interest. "Does it work both ways?"

Amanda was amused. "Of course, Jim. Do you have a message for Spock?"

The two men exchanged a glance, then McCoy chuckled. "We sure have. Just tell Spock this," and he raised both hands with fingers crossed.

She smiled, then after a slight pause announced, "Message received and acknowledged, gentlemen, but I'm surprised at Spock; I didn't know he was conversant with Terran sign language."

"Well, drawled the Doctor, "Jim and I have taught him a thing or two about Human ways. You'd be surprised."

"I have no doubt about it," she replied pleasantly.

At that moment that staff-bearer struck the floor three times to call the assembly back to order.

"Uh-oh, here we go again," muttered McCoy, all thought of banter forgotten.

At once all conversation ceased in the Hall, the groups dissolved, and all returned quietly to their places. The three Humans saw Spock look up in their direction before resuming his parade stance, while his father exchanged a few words with T'Pol before sitting down by Sradek.

A pause ensued. Provost Stravos coolly surveyed the audience, then declared, "The proceedings are now resumed. Let Stonn and Commander Spock come up for judgement."

In the tense silence the two Vulcans approached and stood under the scrutiny of their judges.

Stravos began, "Spock, Stonn, you stand accused of the same offence, therefore your cases will be judged jointly. You have been found guilty of illegally and wilfully fighting D'Alrik Tal to the death, and thus of having violated the guiding Principles of Surak, an inconceivable crime which must be punished with extreme rigor." Here Stravos paused and let his stern gaze wander over the audience, who were

frozen in expectancy.

"On the other hand," he resumed coolly, "the Council is conscious of the fact that in fighting this duel you abided by our sacred traditions and stood up for the honour of your Clans, thus deserving, as of right, our approval and commendation.

"Furthermore the Council is possessed of indisputable evidence proving that you both acted, unknowingly, under the contriving agency of a third party, namely your Chattel, Stonn, and her accomplice of the Lla'Hanak Brotherhood. In sort, we know for a fact that you have been the victims of a deep-laid plot designed for the sole purpose of your elimination. It follows, therefore, that the question is whether the wrong done to you outweighs the wrong that you have done. The Council has, after careful consideration, reached the following conclusions.

Here the Provost paused again, as if deliberately playing with the nerves of the Humans who were hanging on his every word. At last he solemnly proclaimed,

"In view of these facts, and of the aforementioned mitigating circumstances, and also because to condemn on the one hand and praise on the other would be illogical, it is the decision of this Court to render a favourable verdict and withdraw the charges laid against you."

A murmur stirred over the Hall, whether a reaction of satisfaction or disapproval it was hard to tell.

The Lady Amanda heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank god!" she breathed. "He is in the clear. Sarek was right."

"A full acquittal," Kirk said happily. "Even better than expected."

"Wait!" hissed McCoy. "I think there's more to come."

He was right. The Provost raised his hand for silence, then calmly proceeded,

"This verdict necessarily implies that you, Stonn, and you, Spock, will henceforth abide by our laws without fail."

Both men bowed in silent assent.

"Commander," went on Stravos, his keen gaze locked onto Spock's, "you are cleared of all blame. Conclusive evidence has proved that your conduct throughout this incident conformed to your Vulcan heritage. It has been proved that you took up Stonn's challenge only after having been subjected to extreme provocation and prejudice. Also, having won the combat as a true warrior, you refused to exercise your right to give the finishing stroke, and you spared the life of your fallen adversary. In showing Stonn mercy you proved your respect for life and for the teachings of Surak. For these reasons, and because this illegal duel was forced upon you, we solemnly declare your name and that of your Clan clear of all blame, and your honour intact. You will therefore leave this Court free and in high esteem, Spock. Live long and prosper."

In the pause that followed while the audience, struck by this unprecedented tribute, waited for Spock's response his mother whispered,

"I can't believe it! So unexpected, so overwhelming!"

"Do you think so?" Kirk said. "Well, after what he's been through, that was the least they could do."

Amanda, divided between shock and amusement, looked at him. "But Captain, you don't seem to understand. This is a

Vulcan Court of Law!"

Meantime Spock, keeping intrusive emotions firmly in check, bowed and replied, "Lord Provost, Councillors, I respectfully acknowledge your verdict, and pledge my honour to take heed of your recommendation in future. Peace and long life." He saluted the Council and went with measured steps to join his father, whose strong features shone with ill-concealed pride and satisfaction.

The Head of the Council then turned to the man left standing in front of the trial board, and the look he bent upon him was much less favourable.

"As for you, Stonn, I cannot say that your behaviour has been entirely blameless in this affair. You are also discharged, since it has been proved that you were used as a tool in the machinations hatched against Spock. But a close examination of your case shows a regrettable lack of judgement in your conduct, and an equally regrettable degree of credulity and bigotry. The fact that you were easily manipulated into believing the accusations brought against Spock shows in you a tendency to fallacious reasoning. However, there is no mind so biased that it cannot be reformed through strict discipline and meditation. It is therefore the decision of the Council that you go into retreat with the Masters of Gol for a period of two years, after which time you will resume your current activities if - and only if - the Masters consider it opportune. They alone can be judges in the matter. And so it is to be."

As Stonn seemed to be rooted to the spot and crushed by the sentence, Stravos looked past him and said coolly, "Now there remains the crucial question of your chattel, Stonn. let her come here!"

He raised an authoritative hand, and the cloaked figure approached in a heavy

silence. She paused beside Stonn, slowly raised her hood, and let it fall back on her shoulders, revealing the perfection of her flawless features and elegant hairstyle.

"God, she really is beautiful," was Captain Kirk's hushed comment.

"Sure, and all the more dangerous," McCoy reminded him.

Down in the Hall the Provost, with hardly a glance at T'Pring, was saying, "Stonn, your chattel holds a great responsibility in this case. Although she obstinately declined to answer our questions during the hearings, her culpability has been fully established, and she must be severely punished. But her fate depends on you alone, since tradition grants you the rights of life and death over your chattel. The prerogative and the decision are yours, Stonn."

Stonn stirred at last, swallowed hard, and met the eyes of the judges. "Lord Provost," he said in a muted voice, "the decision is no longer mine. T'Pring is my chattel no longer. We have separated."

There was sensation in the Court at the unexpected turn of events.

"You and T'Pring are no longer bonded?" Stravos sounded displeased. "Then why were we not informed?"

"I ask forgiveness," Stonn said, "but our bond was severed and nullified this very morning before this session. From now on I relinquish all rights over T'Pring, and commit her case to the Council."

The Provost turned and exchanged looks with his colleagues, then declared, "Very well. We shall assume the responsibility and proceed. You may withdraw, Stonn. Let your retreat at Gol be beneficial. The Masters have been

forewarned of your arrival. They expect you within two days."

It was a chastened Stonn who limped back to his kinsmen without a single glance at his former bondmate.

After a brief pause Stravos resumed, "T'Pring, need I specify the offences of which you are guilty? Deceit, slander with malice aforethought, duplicity, incitement to murder... these are but a few from a long list. Are you aware of the sentence you deserve for these crimes?"

"I am aware." T'Pring's voice was clear and self-assured.

"Provost! A moment, please," broke in another voice. It was T'Pau, who was approaching with regal authority. "With the permission of the Council, may I have a word with the accused?"

An unprecedented request indeed, but who could refuse anything to T'Pau? Stravos bowed and quietly replied, "Granted, T'Pau. you may proceed."

Up in the gallery curiosity had reached its peak.

"How about that?" marvelled the Doctor. "What do you think the old fraud is up to now?"

"No idea, Bones, but I'll bet this has been pre-arranged," said Kirk.

"Oh? You think those two are in cahoots?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

Meanwhile T'pau was facing T'Pring and submitting her to one of her searching stares. "T'Pring," she said presently, "your misdeeds have brought shame and dishonour on your people. It is only right that you take the

consequences, painful though they may be. According to the law you will be declared unfit to live on Vulcan, deprived of your citizenship, and banished. However, we know how to temper justice with mercy. Should you publicly make amends and express sincere regret the Xtmpsrqzntwlfed Clan may propose leniency to the Judicial Council and recommend a remission." T'Pau paused for breath and also for effect, then continued, "As a substitution, we propose that you be taken to Mount Seleya to spend the remainder of your life with the Adepts in retreat and contemplation. I trust that appropriate disciplines and penitential exercises may enable you to redeem yourself and eventually obtain some degree of serenity. Your fate depends on your decision now, but remember that once pronounced the sentence will be irrevocable. Think about it, T'Pring. You have already wasted much of your life through your own fault. Do not destroy what is left of it."

One could have heard a pin drop in the Hall but T'Pring, far from showing confusion and remorse, let a smile of contempt flare on her arrogant face.

"I refuse," she declared flatly. "I have no time for your pity, I have no time for vain regrets. What is done is done. It was forced upon me because I was denied my rights. I do not want your leniency, T'Pau. I reject your warped, clannish justice. I demand my rights!"

"Your rights?" T'Pau's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Have you taken leave of your senses, girl? You forget your place. You have no rights, save one - the right to beg for mercy and forgiveness."

"Never!" The woman, eyes flashing with rage, threw all caution to the winds. "Better to be banished than humiliated. I will not demean myself by begging for mercy. Do not patronize me, T'Pau. I am

not of your Clan. I am no longer a chattel. I will not be ordered about. And by right and custom I am now free to choose my bondmate. It is my right!"

She insolently turned her back on the Matriarch to face Spock, who was standing a few paces away as though turned to stone. The look of defiance she gave him was enough to send cold wave of anger washing over him.

But T'Pau was not to be so easily outdone. Seething with indignation she neatly stepped between the two former betrothed and striking the floor sharply with her cane she snapped, "No, T'Pring, absolutely not! You renounced all rights when you challenged many years ago. Your disgraceful behaviour proves that your actions were from the beginning taken with pure malice and intent. Since you spurn our mediation, I now relinquish your fate to the Judicial Council and abide by their decision. Provost, Councillors, I thank your forbearance for allowing me this attempt. It was, alas, to no avail. Let the trial proceed. She is all yours."

With a nod to the Council the Matriarch took her leave and stalked back to her place, little imagining the memories her last words had suddenly conjured up in Spock's and T'Pring's minds. They were the same words uttered by T'Pring on the Ha'aka Hill, the terrible words by which she had abandoned Spock to his worst enemies.

'He is all yours!' she had told them, certain that Spock could not survive, and that her hurt pride would be avenged. Now, in the gaze they exchanged, each saw what was in the other's mind. What an ironic, unexpected reversal of the situation.

Probably what Humans call poetic justice, Spock thought as he watched her

sombrely.

Curiously, and in spite of being honourably discharged of all blame, Spock experienced no satisfaction, only a sense of relief at the thought that this unpleasant affair would soon be over. He appeared as calm and remotely austere as ever, but the successive blows to which he had been mentally subjected in the past hour had somehow impaired his resilience. The support of his friends, the presence of his father, a pillar of strength at his side, had comforted him; but as Amanda liked to say, there was only so much a man could take, and he now felt that he could take no more.

The strange blend of hatred and hunger which he read in T'Pring's eyes before she turned away chilled him to the bone. Spock allowed himself an imperceptible sigh. He had to admit that T'Pau had been right. That very morning she had told him, in no uncertain terms, that he was a fool to trouble himself over T'Pring. His request to try to save the girl from banishment, the worst fate that could befall a Vulcan, was illogical, emotional, useless, and a waste of time. Nevertheless, T'Pau had yielded to his insistence and made the attempt which only she could make. The result had only revealed T'Pring in her true light, and confirmed her conviction. Yes, T'Pau was right; he was a fool.

Such were the bitter thoughts that ran through Spock's mind as he looked on listlessly while the judgement progressed to its foregone conclusion. In a daze he heard Stravos drone out the long sentence, and even grant the accused a reprieve of five days before leaving Vulcan, thus giving her time to put her affairs in order, and to take her leave of those who were still on speaking terms with her.

When T'Pring was finally escorted

away and looked back at him for the last time, her eyes still held that strange expression of bitter hatred and regret. Kaiidth! It no longer mattered now. He felt that he could no longer bring himself to care. He was conscious only of a great lassitude, and of the need to be alone, the need to retreat into himself and try to recover some peace of mind.

As last the Provost declared the session closed and the staff-bearer gave the signal for the assembly to depart. As they went out Spock could appreciate the smooth efficiency with which his father, assisted by Sirvann, Shundak and some others, closed in on him to shield him from the swarm of reporters who descended upon him armed with cameras and recorders.

"Commander, a word, please!"

"What exactly was the accusation?"

"Spock, what are your impressions?"

"Ambassador, a word for Inter-News-Corp!"

"Spock, who is that TPring? Is she your wife?"

"Commander!"

All they could get were a few close-up shots. Ambassador Sarek's imperious glare, reinforced by the irresistible impetus of his fellow Vulcans, was more than a match for the newsmongers. Even before attendants had time to intervene and restore order Spock's escort had forced a path through the throng of reporters, who fell away like waves split apart by the prow of a destroyer.

Thus in no time Spock was spirited away and safely shepherded to a private room. Seconds later Captain Kirk came bouncing in, followed at a more sedate

pace by the Lady Amanda and Dr McCoy."

"Spock!" Kirk said breathlessly. "It's wonderful! Are you all right?"

"Perfectly, Jim." Brave words belied by the obvious strain on Spock's face.

Kirk was not fooled, and looked at him searchingly. "Sure, Spock? Gods, when I saw those press guys crowd you, I feared you might never make it, but I reckoned without Vulcan savoir-faire! Congratulations, Ambassador, and you, gentlemen. That was a remarkable show of force."

There was a little glint of humour in Sarek's eyes as he said calmly, "We are honoured, Captain. That is praise indeed, coming from an expert such as you."

"Sarek," Amanda intervened quietly, "with your permission, I think it is time to go home." Her concern was evident, and her husband took the hint.

"Certainly. Let us go by the back door. Come."

And so, while the crowds were still commenting on the events in the Judicial Hall, Sarek and his party departed quietly, leaving the disgruntled foreign correspondents with a poor opinion of the Vulcan Public Relations Organisation.

CHAPTER 6

"Jim! Are you ready yet?" called Dr McCoy as he pushed open the door after giving a perfunctory knock. He looked around the room. The slanted shafts of the setting sun, filtering through the window screens, touched everything with a ruby glow, but Jim Kirk was nowhere to be seen.

McCoy frowned at the clothes laid out on the bed and raised his voice. "Jim, we're waiting! Hurry up, will you?"

A muffled voice answered, and seconds later Captain James T Kirk, scantily wrapped in a towel, emerged from the bathroom. "What's all the racket for, Bones?" he asked, energetically rubbing at his wet hair. "That's no way to behave in the residence of a Vulcan Ambassador."

"We're supposed to leave in five minutes, Captain, that's what!" rasped McCoy. "And no fear of upsetting Vulcan protocol, because they've already gone. As far as I know, there are only the three of us left in the house, so we'd better get going, Jim. We can't keep a whole Vulcan Clan waiting - it's unthinkable."

"Nervous, Bones?" Kirk teased as he began to dress.

McCoy strolled to one of the windows and looked out. "No, but this kind of official reception is not exactly my cup of tea, you know."

"Don't I know it!" Kirk chuckled. "At least you can't complain about dress uniforms. A good thing they're not required tonight." He picked up a straw-coloured shirt and held it in front of him with a complacent glance in the mirror. "Yes," he said reflectively, "I rather like this one. What do you think, Bones?"

The Doctor eyes him critically and nodded. "Uh-huh, nice colour, but what about these embroideries and things on the front? Looks a bit fancy to me."

"That's because you don't know anything about Vulcan fashion, Doctor. These are all the rage at the moment."

"Are they? Well, you should know, after all the time you spent in those

shops. I suppose it's to impress the ladies?" was the caustic reply.

"It's to impress *one* lady, Bones."

"Yeah, but so far your charm seems to be wasted on that particular lady. On the other hand, I detected a certain degree of annoyance in our Vulcan the other night," McCoy revealed with satisfaction.

"You did?" Kirk looked pleased with himself. "Yes, looks like my efforts are producing some effect on Spock, which is all that matters, actually." He began brushing his hair vigorously. "And one good thing with this Mav'ikman ceremony, it should take his mind off other things."

"Quite right," said McCoy with a knowing grin, "and I believe that a cosy tete-a-tete with T'Kahalin is indicated as an antidote for T'Pring's noxious effects. Doctor's orders."

"Well your prescription had better be effective, Doctor, because he needs it after what he went through at the trial," Kirk said bitterly. "Thank god it's over now. Spock is in the clear, and in another few days we'll be rid of T'Pring."

"And not too soon," the Doctor commented dryly. "Anyway, I'm sure that in time he will -" A soft knock on the door broke him off short. "Well, talk of the devil," he drawled as Spock came in at Kirk's call.

"Gentlemen," Spock announced, ignoring the provocation, "the skimner is ready. It's time to go."

"Ready when you are, Mr Spock," said the Captain who, with a wink at McCoy, snapped to attention and asked formally, "sir, does our attire meet with your approval?"

Catching the teasing twinkle in the hazel eyes, Spock straightened up, folded his hands behind his back, and assuming his 'superior officer' mode, walked slowly around them, looked them up and down and finally declared, "You'll do, gentlemen. At ease."

"Thank you, Mr Spock; and if I may be so bold, you're quite an eyeful yourself in that suit," Kirk retorted with an appreciative look at his Vulcan's sober midnight-blue elegance. Then, all business again, he grabbed his jacket and set off for the door, saying over his shoulder, "Let's go, my friends. What are you waiting for?"

Moments later Spock's air-car was speeding over the desert, and its pilot was doing his best to satisfy the curiosity of the Humans.

"Ar Elak'ksar is the Family domain located in the foothills of the LLangon range," he informed them.

"But Spock, I always thought ShiKahr was your home?" said McCoy.

"Correct, Doctor. it has been for the last 40 years. Before that it was at Ar Elak'ksar, the original stronghold of the Clan."

"A stronghold, eh? That's where you're taking us? I'll bet it's a ramshackle pile of stones full of draughts and crawling with the ghosts of your ancestors."

Disappointingly, McCoy's bait failed to produce the desired effect. Spock's eyebrow rose in controlled amusement, and he replied blandly, "This is the 32nd century here, Doctor, and Vulcans have acquired a certain degree of civilisation and a certain sense of comfort since the castle was built. Ar Elak'Ksar has been restored, and a few years ago two wings

were converted into comfortable living quarters. My parents often stay here during the hot summer months, as their air is cooler in the hills than in ShiKahr."

"Well I hope it hasn't been modernised too much," Kirk put in. "There's nothing I like better than stately homes steeped in history, and fortified castles complete with towers, battlements, drawbridges, buttresses... you name it."

"Not forgetting the fair maiden and valiant knights, of course!" McCoy jeered. "Jim, I never knew you had such a romantic soul!"

"Unfortunately Ar Elak'Ksar does not possess drawbridges or ghosts, Captain, but I don't think you will be disappointed." Spock pointed at the steep, craggy hills coming into view. "See for yourself."

The huge disc of Eridani, hanging low over the horizon, flashed its last beams across the sand dunes and set off with light and shadow the wind-sculpted cliffs looming in the distance. The Human pair squinted through the viewport in search of the fort.

"Where, Spock? I can't see... Oh, there! There is is!" Kirk exclaimed. "Look, Bones, on top of that big red crag, see? Hard to tell from here. It seems to be part of the cliff - a perfect camouflage."

Indeed, the old fortress, perched on a ridge, looked as if it had been carved out of rock rather than built of assembled blocks. Only the regular pattern of the ramparts told the eye that it was not the work of nature. Spock reduced speed and changed course. As they drew nearer the cyclopean walls, crowned with parapets and towers, appeared to them like a mirage in the red haze of sunset. There in all its arrogance stood the hilltop stronghold of predatory warlords whose

descendant happened to be the gentle and civilised man of their acquaintance.

After a moment of silent contemplation McCoy felt bound to air his views. "Well, Spock, I must admit I never expected anything so spectacular. I'm impressed."

"I am glad that it comes up to your expectations, Doctor," Spock replied placidly.

"Magnificent, Spock!" Kirk enthused. "Exactly my idea of the mythic castle. I guess these walls have witnessed many a feat of arms?"

"They have indeed, Jim," said Spock as he set the air-car in a smooth descent, "but they have also been the scene of appalling carnage in our savage past."

"Is that so?" McCoy sounded sarcastic. "A real congenial bunch of fellows, those ancestors of yours! Are you certain their ghosts don't haunt the corridors at night, moaning and wringing their blood-dripping hands?"

"Absolutely certain, McCoy," Spock retorted repressively. "No-one has ever met a ghost at Ar Elak'Ksar, or anywhere on Vulcan. Ghosts simply do not exist, Doctor."

"That's what *you* say," McCoy muttered darkly, "but you won't get it out of my mind that down in the dungeons, at the stroke of midnight, there are some ghastly hair-raising goings-on."

"I won't even try, Doctor. Given the nature of your mind, it would be a hopeless endeavour," Spock remarked dryly.

"And just what's *that* supposed to mean?" demanded the bristling Doctor, readying for battle.

But he was deprived of his argument as Kirk, glued to the viewport, exclaimed, "Just look at that, Bones! isn't that something? A castle out of a fairy-tale!"

The air-car was now skimming the rooftops and skirting towers which sported emblazoned pennons flapping merrily in the breeze. As they flew over a forecourt Kirk noticed a number of cloaked figures climbing a monumental stone stairway.

"Are we on time, Spock?" he enquired.

"We are, Captain. We must go in last."

"Oh - so as to make a triumphal entrance, I suppose?"

"Precisely. The reception of honoured guests is ordained by immutable rites which must be strictly observed."

"What fun!" grunted McCoy, rolling his eyes skyward.

"But let me add, gentlemen," Spock continued imperturbably, "that after the presentation ceremony there is what you might call... er... a party."

"A party?" McCoy beamed. "How about that! A real party, with lots of food, booze, music, pretty women... Is that it, Spock?"

Assuming his best puritanical air the Vulcan replied, "Something in that style, but of course you won't find here the licence and intemperance which too often characterises Human social functions."

"I don't doubt it, Mr Spock," the Doctor said with a wink at Kirk.

"Okay, now that we've been warned we might as well get on with it," said Kirk. "What are we waiting for, Spock?"

Spock was now keeping the skimmer hovering over the forecourt. "In just a moment, Captain," he replied.

Kirk hesitated, then said, "Oh, all right. But don't we go and park somewhere?"

"The others have all parked on the other side of the keep, but we don't have to," Spock answered cryptically.

Captain and physician traded a mystified glance and settled down to wait.

At last Spock snapped out of his abstraction and touched the controls. "They are now ready for us. We can go."

"How do you know?" McCoy asked curiously, then as realisation dawned he said, "Oh yeah, stupid of me. Vulcan magic, of course."

Spock set the skimmer gliding down as gently as an autumn leaf and touched ground precisely at the foot of the stairs. He switched off power and released the hatch, then looked at his companions. "It is time, gentlemen," he said, standing up. "And Doctor, no magic, Vulcan otherwise, was involved, only a mental message from Sarek."

"Same thing!" quipped the Doctor as he climbed out of the small vessel in the wake of the Captain.

Once outside they could not help but feel somewhat overwhelmed by the grandeur of the place, and they craned upwards, past the stone roofs and the battlements to the patch of velvety sky twinkling with the first stars. But it was time to go, and they followed Spock up the 39 steps to the huge gateway, only to find the nail-studded door firmly closed.

"Looks like we're not wanted here," McCoy muttered to Kirk.

On one side of the door hung a large brass gong which, when struck by Spock with a mallet, boomed loudly with a hollow sound. At once the doors swung open, and they found themselves facing a solid wall of Vulcan warriors in full array. From the crests of their shining helmets to the breastplates of their armour they sported the le-matya rampant, emblem of the Xtmprsqzntwlfld Clan, and they stood in ominous silence, barring the way by holding their long spears crosswise.

The three tall figures who stood on one side offered an equally imposing sight. Clad from head to foot in gold and black, they looked darkly mysterious behind their black cowls, and reminded Kirk of some esoteric ceremony he had once watched on Earth. The same thought occurred to the Doctor, for he sidled up to Kirk and hissed, "Jim, is this a joke, or have we fallen into the clutches of the Vulcan Ku-Klux-Klan?"

"Neither, Doctor," Spock said calmly, "and from now on kindly keep silent."

One of the figures then moved forward and intoned, "Who comes here seeking entry to Ar Elak'Ksar?"

"It is I, Spock, son of Sarek, of the House of Xtmprsqzntwlfld."

"What do you seek, Spock son of Sarek?"

"I request the favour of an audience with our Elders," Spock stated.

"For what purpose?" the other continued.

"So as to introduce these Humans to the Council, and thus obtain for them the goodwill and protection of the Family."

"Impossible!" the hooded man reproved. "The Clan does not admit Offworlders in its midst."

"Wrong!" countered Spock. "The Clan has already admitted a Terran."

"Who are you to dare make such an assertion? What proof do you have?"

"I am Spock, son of Sarek and the Lady Amanda," Spock said with dignity. "I am the living proof of the truth of my statement."

An argument of consequence, no doubt, for the ritual was interrupted for consideration. Then the spokesman resumed,

"What right to these Outworlders have to claim this privilege?"

"One is my Commander, the other my Healer: both are my friends," Spock declared simply.

Another pause followed while the Vulcan conferred with his acolytes, and McCoy and Kirk exchanged a glance.

Finally, the rites having apparently been performed to his satisfaction, the masked man solemnly stated, "Your reasons appear to be sound, Spock, and your request is accepted. Come! We shall lead you to the Council of Elders."

At his signal the guards parted and let Spock and his companions cross the threshold. As if by magic they produced flaming torches, and the cohort set off in good order along echoing corridors which seemed to have been carved out of red rock. With a look at their shadows dancing on the walls, Kirk speculated on the identity of the mysterious Vulcan who had performed the greeting ritual. In spite of the hood that muffled the voice the Captain had the nagging feeling of

having heard it before.

As his shoulder brushed against Spock's Kirk felt a whisper-touch to his mind, the familiar presence seeking admittance. With an inward smile, he opened his mind.

Do come in, Spock. Glad you can spare me a thought.

I felt a certain uneasiness in your mind, Jim. Can I help?

Oh, just something that's puzzling me. That man there - his voice seems familiar. Did I meet him somewhere?

You did, Jim. At the gymnasium and on the Ha'aka Hills.

Got it! Shundak, isn't it? So he's your kin, too? Did he object to our presence here?

No, Jim. He was only discharging his duty. Just wait and see.

With that mild rebuff Spock withdrew as gently as he had entered, leaving his somewhat mystified Captain to summon as much patience as he was able.

The group was now crossing an open-air courtyard surrounded by stone pillars. In the centre a fountain sang, and a big crackling fire sent a myriad of sparks up to the starry sky. Then, after following one of the porticoes they climbed a flight of steps up to carved wooden doors which parted at the approach, and suddenly the trio stood facing a lofty hall ablaze with lights and filled with brilliantly garbed Vulcans. The sight was so unexpected and so dazzling that the Humans paused instinctively at the door; at once a hush settled over the assembly, and all gazes turned expectantly to the newcomers.

"Now what are we supposed to do?"

wondered Dr McCoy, somewhat unnerved at finding himself face to face with all these resplendent Vulcans and suddenly deserted by their escort, who for some reason unknown had simply vanished.

But Spock - thank god! - was very present, standing at their side. "Hush, Doctor," he said. "Just keep calm and follow me."

Then with tranquil authority he stepped forward, and the company parted to form a guard of honour for the visitors. As he and McCoy walked close on Spock's heels Kirk could not help being amused by this reversal of their situations. Usually it was his First Officer, always mindful of etiquette, who walked one or two steps behind *him*.

But here, as McCoy had aptly remarked, they were on Vulcan turf, and had to conform to Vulcan ways and customs. It suited him very well just now to let Spock take the lead, which he did with the graceful dignity inherent in his race, a particular trait which had always struck the Captain; but here, curiously, it was... different, it was more than that. Spock, head held high, moved with measured step in an aura of calm confidence. He was the suzerain commanding respect, the victorious warlord claiming homage and recognition. And come to think of it, the image conjured up in Kirk's imagination was not so fanciful, considering that a few days ago Spock *had* victoriously emulated his warlike ancestors.

As Kirk walked in his friend's wake, watched by all these splendid Vulcans, he thought that this pageantry, a legacy of pre-Reform times, had perhaps not been staged only for their benefit, but also for Spock, the heir to a highborn Family. What an ironic reversal indeed! Spock, who had left his home world in disgrace,

rejected by his peers, disowned by his father, was now greeted as an equal by these superior Vulcans in the historic home of their Clan. Amanda was right: things were changing in the ShiKahr community, and if she was watching their entrance now she must be glowing with motherly pride... and rightly so.

But, where *was* Amanda? Where were the women, for that matter? Kirk cast a surreptitious glance right and left, but so far as he could see there were no ladies, only males present. Well, it probably was one of those men-only gatherings, unless... The Captain squinted upward, and beyond the bronze chandeliers hanging low from the timber vault he could discern massive walls hung with tapestries, shields and weapons. On one side tall windows looked out to the night, while on the other several bays with balconies seemed to lead into upper rooms. And there indeed were the ladies, their faces and jewels gleaming in the half light.

With a nod and a nudge Kirk disclosed his finding to the Doctor.

Following his gaze McCoy muttered, "Some people have all the luck. That's where the best view is."

They had arrived at the dais where the Family Council sat in state. At a glance Kirk took in the colourful rugs strewn on the floor, the torches burning in brackets, and the richly-robed, impressive-looking Elders who sat in high-backed chairs on either side of the majestic and inscrutable Matriarch. Standing guard around them were the warriors of the cohort and the three cloaked men who had greeted them. Their black cowls were pushed back, and true enough, one of them was Shundak, the Master-at-Arms who had acted as Spock's second at the duel.

Now Spock was raising his hand in

greeting and saying solemnly, "Most venerable Elders, peace and long life. I come to serve."

"Live long and prosper, Spock. We were expecting you," T'Pau replied affably. "The Elders have been apprised of the regrettable incidents of the past few days, and of their satisfactory conclusion. We are pleased with your performance throughout this crisis, and with your zeal in defending the good name of the family. You have done well, Spock."

A murmur of approval rose from the assembly. Spock inclined his head and respectfully replied,

"I am honoured, T'Pau."

Suddenly a bloodcurdling yell went up in the hall, taken up and repeated by all the males present, who all stamped one foot in tempo. The roar was indescribable, and made the windows rattle and the Humans' flesh creep.

"Bones, do you realise? It's the war-cry, the voice of Vulcan's savage past!" Kirk hissed as the clamour echoed and washed over them like battering waves.

T'Pau waited patiently for the acclamations to subside, then coolly resumed, "Spock, are these the Outworlders whom you present to the Council of the Family?"

"Yes, they are, T'Pau." Spock moved aside and signalled his friends to come forward.

"I am told that you wish them to be received into the Family. Do you vouch for them?"

"I do, T'Pau, on my honour," Spock replied firmly.

"Very well." The old lady nodded

condescendingly, and looked Kirk and McCoy over as though they belonged to some rare species, after which she proceeded with the rituals. Raising her voice, she asked, "Does anyone else in these precincts wish to come forward and speak for the visitors?"

"I do," said a deep voice.

Spock turned expectantly, the ranks parted, and Sarek, an imposing figure in gold and black robes, approached with solemn tread. He paused with a glance of acknowledgement to his son and guests, then moved on, saluted the Elders, and with an ease born of long practice in intergalactic conferences, he took the floor.

"Honourable Elders, and you, my kinsmen, I stand before you to introduce James T Kirk, Captain of the USS Enterprise, and Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer. They are my son's fellow officers, and currently my guests in ShiKahr. As custom would have it, their Mav'Ikman was to take place upon their arrival but unforeseen circumstances, of which you are all aware, interfered with our plans. It is only tonight that I am able to present Captain Kirk and Dr McCoy, whose reputations have been known on our world for some time. From personal experience I can attest that both are men of good character and high principles. Some of you, I know, have already met them and will, no doubt, support my request and that of my son to receive James Kirk and Leonard McCoy into our family with the courtesy and respect they deserve. T'Pau and Elders, I have had my say. We now await your decision." Sarek stepped back and calmly folded his hands in the ample sleeves of his robe in confident expectancy.

After exchanging looks with her associates the Matriarch rose with great solemnity. She struck the floor with the

staff of her office and proceeded to deliver the age-old formula of acceptance.

"According to our Law and Customs which come down from the Time of the Beginning, and following the pledges made on your behalf by Sarek and Spock, son of Sarek, we, the Council of Elders, have the right to grant you, James Kirk, and you, Leonard McCoy, the honorary status of exalted guests of our House, together with the privileges and duties deriving therefrom. Such is the decision of the Council, and so it shall be!"

In the pause that followed the Captain was about to say a few words of thanks when suddenly a voice was heard loud and clear across the hall.

"I protest!"

In the shocked silence which fell upon the assembly a tall, powerfully built man made his way up to the dais, cast a penetrating look upon the trio, then firmly repeated, "I protest! Venerable Elders, your decision is unwise and inopportune!"

T'Pol replied imperturbably, "It is your right to raise objections, Sanhil, but you must state your reasons."

"My reasons are obvious as they logically follow my observations of Human behaviour. The question is, how far can we trust Outworlders? How do we know if they will observe our prime rule of non-violence, and that they will never take up arms against our Clan, as is stipulated in our code of behaviour? Considering the notorious propensity of Humans for war-mongering, I very much doubt it."

Kirk's protest was forestalled by Sarek, who moved with authority to confront the newcomer. "It seems," he said calmly, "that you paid little attention

to what was just said. I find it regrettable that prejudice against Humans blinds you to the characters of Spock's friends."

"I heard you without prejudice, Sarek, and so did all here. Captain Kirk is your son's friend? Then how can you explain their fight to the death when they were last on Vulcan? How does that tally with your flattering description of Kirk's character?"

At this direct attack on Kirk, Spock and McCoy immediately closed ranks with their Captain, and in such an instinctive unison, obviously born of long practice, that Sanhil, impassive though he looked, was taken aback.

Sensing his advantage, and before Sarek could reply, Kirk raised his hand and said, "One moment, please. With your permission, Madam, I want to reply."

T'Pol nodded assent. "You may speak, Kirk." She was intrigued by this unexpected turn of events, particularly by the instant reaction of the trio, and together with the assembled Vulcans she awaited developments with great interest.

The Captain then rounded on his accuser. "Sir, since you are so well informed you must know that the combat was not of my choosing. It was high-handedly thrust upon me by a Vulcan female recently convicted by the Judicial Council, and for the sake of some ancient custom I knew nothing about. If I was chosen as her champion, if I fought against Spock, it was against my will."

"Incorrect!" the other retorted coldly. "As an Outworlder you were free to decline the challenge. Why did you not do so?"

Kirk hesitated. He felt Spock's discomfort, and knew how painful it was

for his Vulcan pride to hear such a private subject publicly mentioned. Dammit! It was none of their business, after all. What could he say

"Jim!" hissed McCoy. "What's the matter with you? Say something!"

"We are waiting, Captain," Sanhil reminded him. "Why did you accept the challenge?"

Decision made, Kirk drew in a deep breath and declared, "Whatever my reasons were for accepting the challenge, they are private and no concern of yours. That is all I have to say."

"And that's all you'll get for an answer, Mister!" McCoy commented with satisfaction.

T'Pol intervened. "Now let us get this over with. Sanhil, are you satisfied with Captain Kirk's response?"

"I am not," the Vulcan said emphatically. "Kirk did not answer my question. We know for a fact that he fought against his friend. How can we trust such an unreliable Human?"

"That is enough!" cut in a frigid voice, and there was Spock facing Sanhil with a defiant glare.

The room fell silent at once, tense and expectant.

"I am surprised at you, Sanhil." Spock's voice was perfectly controlled. "When I pledged my honour for my Captain, our Elders accepted it. Why not you? My father spoke for my friends; why do you not believe him? You affirm that James Kirk is not to be trusted. I tell you that I trust him with my life, with my soul! Can you do as much with any friend of yours? He took up the challenge, yes, but he did not know it meant a fight to

the death. And it was I who nearly killed him, I who nearly committed murder, not he! How dare you accuse Captain Kirk! How dare you question his loyalty!"

"Good for you, Spock!" broke in McCoy. "About time someone came up with a few home truths. Now it's my turn."

"Don't, Bones!" Kirk said sharply.

"Sorry, Jim, but there are certain things that need to be said. With your permission, Ma'am?" he belatedly asked T'Pol, who sat watching them with close attention.

"Granted, McCoy. Since you have obviously set your mind on having your say, you may proceed."

The ironic undertone in her voice was not lost on the Doctor, who flashed her one of his lop-sided grins and replied unabashed, "Much obliged, Ma'am." Then turning to the aloof Vulcan he fixed him with blazing blue eyes and attacked.

"Look here, Mr... Sanhil, isn't it? You can't go around casting accusations at people, especially when you don't know them. I, on the other hand, happen to know Captain Kirk particularly well, and I tell you that he would never hurt anyone, least of all Spock, his best friend.

"You may not be aware of this, but these two have the reputation of forming the best command team that Starfleet ever had, a team which functions on trust and loyalty. They have saved each other's lives a dozen times over, and you want people to believe that James Kirk could do harm to his closest friend? I tell you, it's impossible.

"When Spock had to come home to Vulcan some years ago, Jim Kirk took the responsibility of taking his ship off

course, contrary to Starfleet orders, because Spock's life was at stake. And when he was chosen for the challenge he accepted it for the same reason. I am Spock's physician, or Healer, if you like. Well, I can attest without committing a breach of confidence that he was in no physical condition then to withstand a fight to the death against Stonn or any of the Vulcans present, let alone that big hulking fellow with the black mask and that nasty-looking knife that he kept holding to our throats.

"That's why the Captain took up the challenge. He knew it was the only way to save Spock's life. Dammit, he couldn't just stand by and watch his friend being hacked to death, now could he?" McCoy glared at the stolid Vulcan, and in final argument added, "And if you don't believe me why don't you ask T'Pol? She was there; she can tell you that I speak the truth."

"That will not be necessary, Dr McCoy," the other replied levelly, "because I was there too."

"You? You were there? Impossible. I would have seen you."

"You did, Doctor. The 'big hulking fellow with the black mask' whom you so aptly described... it was me," Sanhil said.

"Ye gods!" McCoy's jaw dropped.

The Captain then decided that this had gone on long enough, he squared his shoulders and declared in his best command voice, "Now let's get this straight. You were at the challenge, you saw what happened? Then will you kindly tell us what is the meaning of this charade? I think we're entitled to an explanation, don't you agree, Bones? Spock?" He cast a questioning glance at his officers.

"You bet, Jim!" was McCoy's gruff reply.

"Indeed, Captain," said Spock, who with arms folded on his chest was eyeing Sanhil with suspicion. "Sanhil, I fail to see the logic of your interference, and I think you had better explain."

Sanhil looked at the three men in turn and let a subtle expression of appreciation cross his face. "The explanation is simple, Spock. This was just a logical and necessary demonstration." Then, addressing the Elders, he solemnly declared, "T'Pol, you will agree with me that the experiment has proved conclusive. Therefore we fully approve your decision to greet the Humans as honorary members of the Clan. Let them live long and prosper!"

His words were met with a murmur of approval, and before Kirk and McCoy could react to this surprising volte-face, T'Pol stood up.

"Your agreement is duly acknowledged, Sanhil. Now that our decision is approved by the Family, let us greet our guests in the Vulcan way."

At once male voices burst into a roar, and the war-whoops rang again under the roof as they had over the Vulcan desert centuries ago.

"This is the Clan's rallying cry, gentlemen," Sarek told the dazed Humans, "a traditional acclamation in your honour."

"Then we are accepted?" asked Kirk. "I thought for a moment that..."

"No, Captain, your acceptance was never questioned, but for some reason our kinsmen deemed it necessary to put you three to the test. Am I right, Sanhil?"

"Perfectly," the other replied.

"A test?" Kirk wondered. "Whatever for?"

"To prove that your reputation is not over-rated, Captain," put in Shundak, who was now standing at Sanhil's side. "The Enterprise officers are indeed know here, and the friendship which binds them has become something of a legend. It has naturally aroused curiosity and speculation among our people, has it not, Sarek?"

"Quite so," the Ambassador agreed, "but there are some who still deny the advisability, even the possibility, of an understanding between Vulcans and Outworlders."

"Precisely," said Sanhil, "and it was to prove them wrong that with T'Pol's consent we seized the opportunity of the Mav'ikman to show the existence of a link between Spock and his Human fellow officers."

"And," Shundak took up the tale, "Sanhil here was considered as best qualified to conduct the demonstration."

At this announcement Spock lifted an eyebrow, Kirk broke into an amused smile, and McCoy scowled.

"Do you mean to say that all this was a ploy, and that you used us for your demonstration?" he grated.

"Obviously, Doctor," said Spock. "For them, the idea was to provoke our reactions."

"And it worked," the Captain remarked wryly.

"My word! Of all the crafty, green-blooded..." McCoy muttered in exasperation.

"Come on, Bones, it was all in a good cause," Kirk said with a shrug.

"So it was, Captain," Shundak agreed with satisfaction, "and your responses came up in all ways to our expectations. The way you stood up for one another was the best proof of your friendship."

"Glad to have been of service, Shundak." Kirk gave him a sardonic grin. "I take it then that we've passed the test?"

"Absolutely," the Vulcans answered with conviction.

"A very effective demonstration indeed." Sarek's comment was touched with his subtle brand of humour.

"Effective, Father?" Spock eyed him quizzically. "Possibly, but somewhat irrational, don't you think?"

"Oh come on, Spock! Whoever said that Vulcans were rational?" McCoy's sarcasm surprisingly triggered a ripple of amusement all around.

"Who indeed?" said a new voice, laced with suppressed laughter.

They turned round and found themselves facing a group of dazzling women in full formal dress. Among them was the Lady Amanda, who smiled and said,

"May we interrupt your conversation, gentlemen, and remind you that drinks are now being served in the gallery next door?"

CHAPTER 7

Jim Kirk, goblet in hand, was leaning against the balustrade and observing with amusement his First Officer, who was standing a few metres away in the

crowded gallery. While politely acknowledging the greetings of the passers-by, he noted with some relief that the party was not the starchy affair that he had half anticipated. In contrast with the formal Presentation, this looked like a family reunion - which after all, it was. Apparently these people were happy to get together in a convivial atmosphere, not devoid of a certain decorum, however.

The loud laughter and boisterous spirit usually found at Terran social gatherings were out of place here, and the conversations that rose and fell around him were kept at a decent level. Even the young people who had appropriated Spock a moment ago had behaved with proper and gracious Vulcan demeanour. And yet for all their restraint they could hardly conceal their fascination as they plied him with questions. Apparently these bright young things were no more immune to hero-worship than their counterparts in the rest of the Federation.

Such were the Captain's thoughts as he savoured the sparkling wine provided by the faithful Staurak, who officiated at the buffet.

"Interesting, is it not?" said a dry voice at his side.

Kirk turned. "Professor Sradek!" he said genially, then following the old man's gaze he nodded. "Yes, very interesting. Spock, hero of the day. Is that usual on Vulcan?"

"Certainly not, Captain, but all things considered, let us say... understandable," Sradek admitted philosophically.

"Quite," Kirk smiled at him. "After all, a D'Alik'Tal fought to the death, plus a trial before the Judicial Council, are not commonplace. But I'm surprised, Professor - I never knew you belonged to

the Family."

"I do not, but Sarek gave me to understand that my presence would be appreciated, and the Lady Amanda graciously insisted."

"Your presence is indeed greatly appreciated by all of us, Professor, and so was your evidence in Court. It was a contributing factor to the decision of the Council, I'm sure."

"It was the least I could do for my former student," Sradek replied simply, although Kirk could tell he was pleased.

"Perhaps, but it meant a lot, believe me. But tell me, sir - there's something I've wanted to ask you about Spock. What was he like, as a student at the Academy?"

There was definitely a glint of humour in Sradek's eyes as he said, "He was brilliant, Captain. Unpredictable, sometimes even obstinate, but undeniably an exceptionally brilliant student."

Kirk smiled happily. "I expected no less, Professor, and shall I tell you something? He hasn't changed a bit."

"Shall I tell *you* something, Captain? I am not in the least surprised."

Like two accomplices they were sharing a knowing look when a familiar voice said behind them, "Professor, Captain, I am told that the meal will be served shortly. Shall I show you the way?"

"Ah, Spock, that's good news," said Kirk. "I was just beginning to feel a bit hungry. But I see you managed to escape your fans," he teased.

Spock looked embarrassed, much to

his Captain's joy. "Fans, Captain? You must be mistaken," he replied primly. "The species is unknown here."

"Is it? Then how do you explain those wide-eyed young things back there drinking in your every word? If they're not fans of yours, they're certainly playing the part to perfection. Don't you agree, sir?"

Thus called on, Professor Sradek nodded wisely. "Spock, I suggest that you accept the fact, illogical though it seems, that you have become a celebrity. I know you will find that fame is a concept difficult to assume, but you must learn to cope with it and not let it impair your judgement."

Spock gazed at his old teacher and sighed imperceptibly. "I understand, sir, and I appreciate your advice. I shall do my best to act upon it," he replied quietly; then catching sight of Kirk's mischievous smile he asked with assumed innocence, "Is anything the matter, Captain Kirk? No? in that case, let me take you to supper. This way, Professor."

Spock was shepherding his Captain and his former teacher towards the buffet when they ran into Dr McCoy, whom they had lost sight of for some time.

"Ah, there you are," he said breezily. "I was just looking for you. Delighted, Professor Sradek. So we meet again!" The Doctor appeared to be in high spirits.

"Where the devil were you, Bones?" Kirk wanted to know.

"I was socialising, Jim, and would you believe it - I've met lots of 'fascinating' people."

The provoking look he shot at Spock was received with perfect equanimity. "I don't doubt it, Doctor," said the Vulcan.

McCoy grinned and forged ahead, "I also had a session at the bar with Shundak and Sarek's secretary; and good old Staurak, bless him, introduced me to some more local specialities; and last, I had quite a chat with our argumentative friend Sanhil."

"Sanhil?" Kirk sounded surprised. "How come? No more hard feelings?"

"No more, Jim. Sanhil and I have buried the lirpa. And - " McCoy's eyes twinkled, " - you'll never guess what his profession is!"

Kirk looked non-plussed. "I've no idea, Bones. How should I know? Or perhaps, given his physique... bouncer or prize fighter, if such things exist in ShiKahr?"

McCoy stifled a chuckle. "Can't you be serious, Jim? See, you've scandalised Spock. Sure, Sanhil would do very well in the ring, but he's nothing of the kind. Actually, he's the Chief Pediatrician at the Medical Academy, and one of the most brilliant I've ever come across in that field."

Amused by the Doctor's enthusiasm, Kirk whistled. "A pediatrician? I must admit that's rather unexpected. Talk of misleading appearances!"

A slight cough drew their attention to the Professor, whose eyes sparkled with curiosity. "I do not understand," he said. "Spock, explain. What bearing can physical appearance have on a person's occupation?"

"None, sir," Spock told him, "but it is common tendency with Humans to draw premature conclusions from insufficient data, or from what they call 'first impressions'."

"Indeed? Most curious," commented Sradek. "I am not aware, however, of you

having inherited this tendency from your mother, Spock."

"I should hope not, sir!" Spock said righteously. "Such a shortcoming would be most inconvenient and unbecoming in a scientist. Besides..." His voice faded into silence.

Intrigued, Kirk followed his gaze and saw, some distance away, Sarek and Amanda standing talking with a number of guests. He knew most of them, but apparently there was nothing there to strike his First Officer dumb all of a sudden. Curious!

The one of the ladies turned round, and all became clear. He heard McCoy breath in his ear, "God, she's stunning!" and could only nod and stare, for indeed never had T'Kahalin looked so beautiful.

Something in her full-length dress caught the light and glinted as she moved. The mass of her auburn hair was neatly encased in some kind of gold filigree cap encrusted with bloodstones the colour of her eyes, and more of the gems sparkled at her throat. Her golden-green eyes swept over them, alight with a tiny smile of recognition, then lingered on Spock's face as though trapped in his magnetic gaze. Time stood still.

"Ah, gentlemen, we were expecting you," said Sarek's steady voice.

The spell was broken. Heads turned, greetings were exchanged, then on Amanda's invitation everyone proceeded to the buffets where food and drink were served in profusion.

Dr McCoy, balancing a laden plate and a chunk of home-made bread in one hand, was reaching for a mug of frothy karveesh when a voice said at his side, "May I be of service, Doctor?"

McCoy looked round and came face to face with the glittering panoply of a Vulcan warrior. "Oh... er... yes, please." He smiled tentatively. "Have we met before?"

By way of reply the Vulcan removed his close-fitting helmet, and McCoy's eyes crinkled in amusement. "Of course we have! You're Shoran, aren't you?"

"No, Doctor, I am Xan. This is Shoran," he was told.

"Greetings, Doctor," said the other warrior as he deftly retrieved the plate tilting dangerously from McCoy's grasp.

"Thank you, son," the Doctor grinned, and looked appraisingly at the twins. "Sorry, but I got it wrong again. My, you look good in your shining armour. So that was you, escorting us with such pomp? You really gave us quite a show back there."

"We are honoured," they murmured formally, but the Doctor wasn't fooled; he knew they were secretly flattered by his heartfelt praise, Vulcans though they were.

Moments later the twins had made him comfortable, Vulcan fashion, on a pile of rugs with his supper within reach on a low table when Amanda appeared with a plate and goblet and asked, "Do you mind sharing your table with me, Doctor?"

"On the contrary, I'll be delighted!" McCoy, Southern charm to the fore, beamed at his hostess.

She sank gracefully onto cushions beside him and replied to the youths' query if she needed anything, "Not at the moment, Xan, thank you. Why don't you two go and have supper? You need sustenance after your brilliant

performance, don't you?"

The twins looked pleased. "With your permission, Lady Amanda, we will," and with a slight bow they took themselves off.

"Nice boys," McCoy commented as he watched them go, "and damn good-looking in those warrior outfits."

"And so happy to have been selected for the parts," Amanda confided, smiling. "You cannot imagine the fierce competition we had among our young men for the privilege of escorting you."

"Is that so? No wonder I was under the impression they were having a good time."

Amanda smiled and looked around her. "Actually, I believe that everyone is having a good time tonight, and I wouldn't be surprised if your Mav'lkman were recalled in the Family as a very special event, Leonard."

"Same with me," declared McCoy heartily. "I won't forget that ceremony in a hurry." He downed the last of his drink, then leaning forward he lowered his voice. "But something puzzled me, Amanda. I know that Vulcans are notorious for going in for pomp and ceremonies on all occasions, but why should you still hold these fancy rituals to introduce newcomers to the Clan? I mean, rounding up all your folk, having TPau and the Elders officiate, and the warriors, and all the rest of it? Why go to all that trouble for Jim and me? We're not that important to Vulcan - or are we?"

"Perhaps more than you think, Leonard," Amanda said with a knowing look. "But to answer your question, what you saw is exceptional. The presentation ceremony performed tonight has not been held within living memory."

McCoy stared, wide-eyed. "You must be joking!"

"I am not, believe me. We have never done this before," Amanda said, blue eyes dancing.

"Then what was Spock about, telling us it's common practice?"

"He probably meant the simplified version of the Mav'lkman, informal receptions at home and such-like." Then, seeing that the Doctor was truly baffled, she said, "To tell the truth, Doctor, it was all Spock's idea. He told us of Captain Kirk's special interest in history and ancient cultures, and suggested that we take advantage of your visit to reinstate the Mav'lkman in its original form."

"Spock's idea?" McCoy's eyebrows went up in surprise. "I never knew him to be so keen on tradition."

"Neither did we," Amanda smiled reminiscently, "and that such a request should come from Spock of all people all but rocked the Family to its foundations."

"That I can well believe," the Doctor grinned in appreciation.

"In fact," she continued, "the Elders were all pleasantly surprised by Spock's notion, and TPau was particularly in favour, so much so that without more ado she decided to make your presentation an occasion for the Gathering of the Clan, and set everything going. We found the documents relating to the pre-Reform Mav'lkman in the Family Archives, and... well, everyone did their best to make a success of this day - didn't they, Sarek?" she asked her husband, who was now standing beside her.

He gazed down at her in mild reproof. "Of course, my wife. What else did you expect them to do?" A typical Vulcan

reply which drew a grin from McCoy.

"And a success it was, Ambassador. Most impressive."

Sarek looked pleased. "Yes, everything went off quite satisfactorily including that test of Sanhil's which all three of you passed with commendable success, Doctor. A memorable day for all concerned, I am sure."

"One thing that I shall never forget," his wife said quietly, "is the standing ovation that the Family gave our son. Who would have imagined such a welcome just a few years ago?"

"It was perfectly justified," Sarek stated firmly. "Given Spock's irreproachable conduct, and the favourable verdict brought in by the Council, the Clan could do no less." Pride was so evident in his voice that his wife looked at him fondly.

"Yes, my dear, but I still find it most gratifying to see our son finally accepted. But are you going? Won't you join us for supper?"

"Later, perhaps. I must now discuss tomorrow's meeting with TPau and the Elders."

"Very well," Amanda said simply, then as a thought crossed her mind she added, "by the way, will Spock be needed at the High Council?"

"Certainly. His presence is required. Why?"

"Our son had arranged to take his friends over to Tsai-Kal tomorrow, to spend a few days at the farm. He still needs rest, you know," she reminded him.

"I know." Sarek considered, then said, "I regret, but Spock cannot be spared. His

statement is essential to the debate. On the other hand," he continued with a look at McCoy, "there is no reason why our guests should wait for Spock. Doctor, I suggest that you and James leave tomorrow as scheduled, and Spock will join you later. Perhaps you might go with them, Amanda. A cure at the Spa is always beneficial. Is that arrangement acceptable, Doctor?"

"Quite, sir. That is, if the lady has no objection?" McCoy cocked an enquiring eyebrow at Amanda, who replied brightly,

"No objection at all. I shall be glad of a change, and an Ambassador's wife is accustomed to these short-notice decisions. I only wish that you could find time to join me at the Spa, Sarek."

"I cannot for the present, Amanda. I must leave you now." Sarek walked off to a nearby table where TPau and Sradek were already sitting.

McCoy could not but look with interest as the stately Ambassador sat cross-legged beside them without losing one scrap of his dignity, then he remarked "Correct me if I'm wrong, Amanda, but your husband seems to approve of Spock now. Does this mean their estrangement is definitely over?"

Subtlety was never one of McCoy's strong points, but Amanda was not offended by his point-blank question. She knew that she could safely confide in the good Doctor, who under a somewhat crusty mask hid a compassionate soul, so she told him in an undertone, "Yes, definitely, I'm happy to say. God knows how many years they've wasted, but they are both so strong-willed, so absolute in their opinions."

"Don't tell me!" was McCoy's caustic comment. "Stubborn as a mule, our First

Officer. Takes after his father, no doubt."

Amanda merely smiled and cast a fleeting glance at the next table, where Spock was now attending his father. "At least they're content and at ease in each other's company."

"Yeah, so I've noticed," the Doctor said, following her gaze. "They've come a long way from that day when you first set foot on the Enterprise, haven't they?"

"A long way indeed. It was probably that Romulan conspiracy two years ago when we believed Spock to be lost to us that made them finally realise how much they care for each other. But of course, being Vulcans they will not admit it. Love is an emotion, Doctor, and as you must be aware, emotions..."

"I'd have to be deaf not to be aware! Spock has dinned that into my ears long enough. But tell me, if love is to be ignored or repressed, or whatever, what do Vulcans do when they want to take a wife? If they're not bonded from childhood, how do they tell a girl?"

"They don't."

"They don't? Then how does the girl know? For instance - sorry for being personal - how did Sarek...?"

A secret smile warmed the lady's face. "He did not have to, Doctor. I knew."

"Oh? feminine intuition, I presume?"

"In part, yes. But don't forget that Vulcans are telepaths, and there are ways and means far more subtle than the methods of Human males, believe me."

"Really? Sounds fascinating," said McCoy, much taken by the idea; then with a nod in Spock's direction he said, "Do you think that the Vulcan method

might work in this particular case?"

"I cannot say, Leonard," she sighed. "So much depends on circumstances, on opportunities..."

"And on Jim's little game?" he suggested, looking at Jim Kirk, who was standing glass in hand and holding forth to a captive audience, among whom were T'Pol and her brother Spock.

"Perhaps, who knows?" Amanda turned a speculative gaze onto the group and smiled. "I must say that your Captain plays his part to perfection, but then he is such a charmer."

"That he is, for sure, and I can tell you that he's enjoying every minute of it!" was McCoy's caustic reply. Then, suddenly aware of a presence behind him, he looked round and started guiltily at finding himself watched by a pair of quizzical brown eyes.

But McCoy was an old hand, and he reacted like a shot. "Ah, Spock, there you are. We were just talking about you," he said genially.

"Indeed, Doctor?" A slanted eyebrow expressed suspicion.

"Yeah. About that business at the High Council," he explained glibly. "Too bad you're being kept in town for a while, but at Sarek's suggestion your mother is coming with us tomorrow, and you'll join us later, if it's all right with you."

"Perfectly, Doctor. Yes, I was informed of your plans and I concur with your decision, Mother. I shall have supper now, so if there is anything you wish me to bring you from the buffet - some txvumpf, perhaps?"

"Yes, dear, I'd love some, with tika sauce, please," his mother requested.

"What on earth is that?" McCoy wondered.

"That, Doctor, is a Vulcan delicacy which has nothing to do with Earth," Spock said flatly.

"Spock!" Amanda protested. "Can't you be more explicit? Txvumpf, Leonard, is mixed vegetable and fruit skewered and grilled over embers and flavoured with herbs and spices. Look." She pointed to the courtyard, where people were busying themselves over barbecues by the fire. "Can't you smell the spices from here? It's delicious - you should try it."

"Okay, then, I'll have some of your chumpf, Mr Spock, and another drink, if you would be so kind."

"Txvumpf, Doctor. Your pronunciation leaves much to be desired."

"Whatever you say, Spock," the Doctor replied amiably. "Oh, and while you're over there, why don't you try and keep Jim from monopolising the prettiest woman at the party?"

Spock's face registered a momentary flash of annoyance as he turned a considering gaze on his Captain, who was deep in conversation with the Lady T'Kahalin. A few seconds went by, then Spock looked back at McCoy and declared coolly, "What you ask is impossible, Doctor. The Captain cannot alter his nature any more than a leopard can change its spots."

And with that sententious comment the Vulcan left a thwarted Human muttering darkly, "Damn! Wonder where in Hell he picked up that one?"

"Not in Hell, Doctor; in the Bible," murmured a sweet voice.

"Huh?" McCoy stared at Amanda,

whose eyes twinkled back at him. "I see, in the Bible, huh? I might have known. Like mother, like son. Jim was right. But one thing, though - looks like his bright idea of an agent provocateur is a flop, doesn't it? There seems to be no way of shaking your son out of his Vulcan cool, and it's not for want of trying."

"Do you think so?" Amanda, a small smile on her lips, was following Spock with loving eyes. "I'm not so sure," she said softly.

Moments later the Doctor was still wondering whether Amanda, with her motherly intuition, might not well be right when Spock came back with the fruit and vegetable kebabs and settled down beside them to eat his supper. The Vulcan speciality turned out to be surprisingly good, particularly when dipped in the tika berry sauce which McCoy tested with caution and found to be much to his liking.

The three were quietly savouring their food when Jim Kirk showed up carrying a plate piled with food. "May I join you?" he asked, and on the "Be my guest" from McCoy plumped himself down beside Spock and announced, "God, I'm ravenous!" Then eyeing the others' plates he asked, "What's that you're having? It smells real good."

"These are strumpf, Jim, a Vulcan speciality," McCoy informed him, "and they taste as good as they smell. Want some?"

"Shall I fetch some for you, Jim?" asked Spock, poised to go.

"Not now, Spock, thank you. I have plenty already," said the Captain, heartily tucking into his food.

"And to what do we owe the favour of your company, Jim?" McCoy asked

presently. "What kept you so long?"

"Oh, I was just socialising, Bones," Kirk replied airily.

"So we noticed," was the sardonic reply, "and with the ladies in particular."

Spock then joined in. "Did you enjoy yourself, Captain?"

Kirk favoured him with one of his radiant smiles. "Enormously, Spock. You know, on some people pointed ears are downright attractive."

This left the Vulcan speechless, and Amanda a fascinated audience, at pains to keep a straight face, but McCoy, taking his cue, said, "You know, Jim, I don't want to spoil your fun, but it seems to me that the old Kirk magic isn't operating on warp drive there. I wonder why?"

Aware of Spock's close attention, Kirk, for effect, took time to gulp his mouthful and wash it down with a long draught of K'Vass. Then he shrugged and heaved a deep sigh. "I know why, Bones - my ears are the wrong shape. I'm afraid I don't stand a chance. Now if I had elegant pointed ears like those of my First Officer, things might be different, don't you agree, Mr Spock?"

"Certainly not, Captain!" he replied curtly. "On Vulcan, sir, when it comes to assessing the qualities or shortcomings of an individual, the physical appearance never comes into account. Now if you will excuse me, I shall go and fetch some more txvumpf." And in one smooth motion Spock unfolded his long body, stood up, and departed with dignity.

"Well?" asked Kirk, obviously pleased with himself.

McCoy chuckled, and Amanda shook her head at him. "Jim Kirk," she declared,

"that was outrageous!"

"I know it was." The Captain grinned, unrepentant. "But it worked!"

"So it did," said McCoy, "and I think you were right, Amanda."

And indeed as the party ran on into the night it became apparent to McCoy that Spock, while feigning aloof indifference, was the prey of a perplexity verging on irritation at the sight of Kirk's tactical manoeuvres, and T'Kahalin's baffling response; but then Spock could not know that the subject of their conversations, and of the lady's obvious interest, was none other than himself, which made it all the more interesting for the watchful Doctor.

But matters really came to a head when the music began.

By the end of supper a small group had gathered around T'Pau and was quietly talking over a drink when the sound of a harp, soon joined by other string and reed instruments, rose above the hum of conversation.

As the musicians, grouped on the steps of the fountain, settled into a soft, captivating melody, McCoy seized the opportunity to ask T'Kahalin for the favour of some music, a suggestion which met with approval all round, and which Amanda seconded.

"Would you play for us, my dear? We would be delighted to hear your latest composition." Then as T'Kahalin hesitated Amanda delicately suggested, "And perhaps my son might join you in one of those ballads in which you both excel. Would you, Spock?"

A pause ensued. T'Kahalin waited,

acutely aware of Spock's watchful eyes upon her face, and of the unfortunate blush creeping up her cheeks.

Then he said, "I shall be honoured, Mother, if T'Kahalin is agreeable."

There was no reason then to waver any longer, and she replied with correct formality, "The honour is mine, Commander," inwardly pleased that her voice was as cool and controlled as Spock's. She raised her eyes and met his searching gaze, and then all pretence was swept away, for the look which passed between them was so revealing that it took their breath away, and left the shrewd Doctor in no doubt that something definitely existed between them.

Feeling suddenly awkward, as if he were intruding on something very private, McCoy averted his gaze and turned his attention to his fellow conspirators. Amanda's expressive face betrayed a satisfaction which was curiously mirrored, although to a lesser degree, on Sarek's serene features. Apparently the Ambassador was privy to the situation and seemed to approve. As for Kirk, he returned the glance with a wink and a smug grin, the satisfaction of a job well done.

For indeed the confusion, the unease that Kirk had perceived in his friend while he, Kirk, had ostentatiously kept company with T'Kahalin, seemed to have vanished. She had just gazed at Spock, he he, all frustration forgotten, had let himself be drawn into those magnificent eyes of hers as if unable or unwilling to escape their magic.

The voice of T'Pau broke the spell. "We shall be pleased to hear your performance, T'Kahalin. However, the Sir'Takuht must come first," she declared with authority.

By then the harps had finished their piece and drums were beating softly, rhythmically, while several young men were gathering by the fire that had been rebuilt.

Intrigued, the Captain asked, "And what is the Sir'Takuht?"

It was Professor Sradek who provided the information. "Literally, the Sun Dance, Captain, a ritual war dance performed without change at the Clan's gatherings."

"Indeed," said T'Pau. "This ritual dance, Kirk, comes down from the dawn of time. It is traditionally led by the male Head of our House, or by a surrogate deemed worthy of the privilege. Who will it be tonight, Sarek?"

"I believe that our kinsmen have already made their choice," Sarek replied placidly as a few youngsters came up the steps.

He was right. They saluted and Sirvann, acting as spokesman, said formally, "Sir, with your permission the Clansmen wish for Spock to lead the Sir'Takuht tonight."

Spock started slightly, but his father did not seem in the least surprised and replied, "You have my leave, Sirvann. The request is granted. Spock, go with them."

But Spock's first response was to decline. "I cannot accept, father. The honour is yours by right."

"So it is, but tonight you are chosen by the Clan as my substitute, and the honour is now yours. Go, my son; our kinsmen are waiting."

Seeing Spock's hesitation the Matriarch intervened, "What is the matter, Spock? Do you scorn the honour

that is done you?"

"I do not, T'Pau," he answered, somewhat nettled by her tone. "On the contrary, I am very conscious of the privilege bestowed on be, but... it has been a long time. I am not sure I can..."

"Nonsense!" she broke in sharply. "A true Vulcan never forgets the rites and customs of his forebears!"

Spock winced inwardly, stung by her blunt statement and its implications. 'Art thee Human, or art thee Vulcan?' Would he ever hear the last of that question which hurt like an open wound? But he had his pride, and pulling himself under tight control he replied, "Very well, T'Pau. Let it be as you wish."

Rising to his feet he said formally to Sarek, "I abide by your decision, sir, and accept the honour of leading in your stead." Then turning about Spock strode down the steps, the youngsters close on his heels.

McCoy, ever watchful, caught a gleam of triumphant satisfaction in T'Pau's black eyes as she watched Spock take his place in the circle, and he was intrigued. For all he knew the astute old lady, with her biting remarks, might well have led Spock just where she wanted him. Why was that? Another test, perhaps? Whatever it was, McCoy felt sure that it would certainly be worth watching.

Then, meeting Kirk's quizzical gaze, he drawled, "How about that, Jim? Rather unexpected, wasn't it?"

"Well," replied the Captain, "I should know by now there are no limits to his accomplishments, but still I admit to being surprised, Bones. I never knew that my First Officer could dance, let alone conduct ritual dances like this... er... Sir'Takuht."

Vulcan eyebrows climbed at that remark, and Amanda hastened to explain, "Jim, all Vulcan children learn music and dancing in kindergarten."

"Is that so?" put in McCoy. "For educational purposes, i suppose?"

"Quite so, Doctor." Healer T'Lian joined in the conversation. "We consider dancing to be an essential factor in education and physical development. It helps the children to acquire proper behaviour patterns and correct deportment."

"I quite believe you," commented Kirk, having in mind the graceful bearing which characterised Vulcans in general and Spock in particular.

"Kindergarten, eh? I can just visualise little Spock learning his first steps of dance." McCoy obviously enjoyed the idea, then as a new thought occurred to him he remarked, "But as he said, it's been a long time. Do you think he'll remember?"

"Spock often danced the Sir'Takuht in his early youth, Leonard," Amanda said, "and he should remember."

She looked at her husband, who stated with calm certainty, "He will, Doctor. He will."

Following Sarek's gaze they saw that the young Vulcans, whose number had considerably increased, were standing motionless around Spock while the slow cadence of the drums, rumbling like the roll of distant thunder, emphasised the strange feeling of suspense.

McCoy was struck by their vacant expressions and enquired, "What are they doing now? Communicating mentally?"

"Precisely, Doctor," Sarek told him.

"By means of a light mind link, Spock is attuning them to himself and to one another."

"The warlord link, gentlemen," put in Sradek, obviously determined to give the Humans their full measure of Vulcan history. "In the past, such a bond made it possible for the Chieftains to communicate covertly with their men, to rally them in the thick of battle. I recommend you pay close attention to the figures of this dance. Their symbolism is highly significant."

The historian had hardly spoken when the dancers, suddenly galvanized by a deafening roll of the drums, snapped out of their trance and, arms on each others' shoulders, formed a large ring in the centre of which stood Spock, their physical and mental focal point. The harps played a flourish echoed by the shrill notes of reed pipes, then they launched into a solemn melody, and with stately steps the dancers began moving in a slow circle around Spock, who danced facing each in turn.

The musicians gradually quickened the tempo, the Sun Dance gathered momentum and took all its significance as the Vulcans, in their rich attire and flashing gems, moved like multicoloured spheres orbiting a sun, a cobalt blue star whose magnetic aura focused and controlled their impetus.

The Sun Dance continued in that mode for some time, then the cadence changed and the circle broke up. A new pattern took shape as the dancers paired off, side by side, then opposed, facing their Chief and each other in turn. Driven by the insistent drums and pipes they stamped, turned, crossed, stamped, back and forth with energetic steps and primitive movements simulating combat.

Meantime in the watchful audience

the Human guests stared wide-eyed, fascinated by the alien, haunting melody, the strange rhythms and combinations of steps, and the grace and beauty of these young Vulcans whose intent faces shone above the dancing flames as they solemnly enacted the rituals performed by their warrior ancestors around the camp fires.

But what struck them most was the sight of Spock. What a revelation to see him dancing with his young cousins, on his native soil, and conducting with unerring authority the ritual patterns as though he had done nothing else in his life. With something of a shock Kirk and McCoy watched their sober and gentle friend transformed, by the magic of a dance, into a fierce warrior, a symbol of Vulcan's savage past. With his feline grace, his dark eyes burning with a strange, wild fire, never had Spock looked more alien, more beautifully exotic... and more remote from the steady First Officer of the Enterprise.

It almost looked as if he deliberately flaunted his primitive Vulcanity in the faces of the watchful Clan, with a curious lack of restraint faithfully mirrored in his fellow dancers. Maybe it was the excitement of the dance, the obsessive rhythm of the music, or perhaps for the first time Spock wanted to prove to himself and to the Clan that here he was, the heir to the most powerful House of Vulcan, perfectly capable of conducting the ancient rites of his Clan - in short, that his Vulcanity was not to be questioned.

If that was indeed the reason, Spock had succeeded. The Vulcans were impressed. He had undeniably captured their attention, not least that of a lady whose green eyes never left his elegant figure as he danced with his peers.

Then again the musicians switched to another rhythm, slow and resounding,

and the audience's attention was redoubled, for the Sir'Takuht was coming to its conclusion. The Vulcans once more closed around Spock and danced shoulder to shoulder, forming the Circle of Warriors, but they were now facing outward like a living rampart about the Chieftain. Thus the ritual of the Sun Dance was made complete.

They turned three times in a circle, then paused, and suddenly the Clan's war cry, as fierce as the howl of a le-matya, burst out, roared by dozens of male voices with such fire that the echo lingered on around the courtyard before vanishing into the night.

Kirk and McCoy exchanged a glance and waited. Then after a moment of silence the musicians launched into a lively tune which at once brought the ladies to their feet. Moving with stately dignity they joined the dancers, who now stood in line waiting for them. Couples formed, the harps swept a signal, and a dance similar to old Terran reels began.

Kirk, amused by the spectacle of these formal Vulcans engaged in a folk dance, noticed that Spock was standing apart in his familiar pose, hands behind his back, in conversation with Sirvann and some of the youngsters, but Sarek's voice brought his attention back to his host.

"An interesting performance, was it not? Does this Sir'Takuht meet with your approval, T'Pau?"

Under his composure Sarek seemed to be pleased, and so was Amanda for that matter, for her face glowed with ill-concealed pride. Obviously Spock's performance had come up to his parents' expectations.

T'Pau sat poker-faced as usual and coolly replied, "It does, Sarek. The ritual has indeed been conducted and enacted

adequately and in conformity with our rules. Our young men are to be commended. Furthermore, a special mention must be made of Spock, whose leadership, flawlessly inspired and controlled, has proved to be worthy of his ancestry. Notwithstanding his Human heritage, the Vulcan blood runs true in your son," she admitted with a glance at Spock's mother.

"Most kind, T'Pau, but I never doubted that," Amanda said in honeyed tones, a significant exchange which was not lost on Dr McCoy.

"Looks like Spock has passed the test," he whispered in Kirk's ear.

"He certainly did, and with flying colours," Kirk heartily agreed, remarks which earned them a sharp look from the Matriarch and a sweet smile from Amanda.

Presently the latter rose, shook out her flowing robes and said, "Sarek, dear, with your permission I shall ask the Captain for the next dance. Will you, Captain?" She held out her hand invitingly.

Surprised and flattered, Kirk stood up and replied with due formality, "I shall be delighted, but does the honour not fall first to the Ambassador?"

"No, Kirk, and for two reasons." There was a glint of humour in Sarek's eyes as he explained, "First, my wife can tell you that I find it more pleasing to watch her dance with another than practice that activity myself. Second, where dancing is concerned here, unlike Earth, females have the prerogative of choosing their partners."

"Really? I think that's wonderful," McCoy declared.

"And," Amanda pointed out with

sparkling eyes, "it is extremely ill-mannered for a male to decline a female's invitation."

"Do you hear that, Jim?" McCoy chortled.

"Me? Decline? Not on your life!" Kirk protested. "But there's a problem, Amanda. What if I make a fool of myself? Vulcan dances are not my forte, you know."

"Don't tell me you've never practised folk dances in Iowa, Jim. You'll see, Vulcan traditional dances are no more complicated. Come along. And you, my dear," she said to T'Kahalin, "what are you waiting for when I see young men over there waiting hopefully for a partner? Don't you want to dance? I know of one at least who would be honoured to be your first choice. Do come with us."

And the Lady Amanda firmly gathered Kirk and T'Kahalin in tow, claimed her son's attention with authority; the next moment she had him standing in line with T'Kahalin, and proceeded to lead Kirk through the patterns of the dance.

What with music, dancing, drinks regularly supplied by Staurak's efficient staff, and occasional informative conversations - since Vulcans do not indulge in small talk - Dr McCoy finally had to admit something he would have thought impossible: he was enjoying himself at a Vulcan reception. So were his hosts, in their quiet, subtle way, even T'Pau, who sat there like a hieratic idol, surprisingly alert despite the late hour. As for Jim, he was having fun, no doubt about that. Being light on his feet it had not taken him long to get the gist of the steps, and with Amanda's occasional

prompting he was doing very well indeed; so well that when they paused for breath after a couple of dances, several ladies came and claimed him for partner.

Amanda readily left him in their care, glad to sit down for a while, and when the music started anew in a slow, curiously enticing tune, the Captain was irresistibly swept into the dance by a raven-haired beauty.

"There he goes," commented McCoy, "the old Kirk charm at work again!"

A soft laugh from Amanda answered him. "Jim may well find his match before long. Just you watch, Doctor." On McCoy's querying look she added with a mischievous smile, "You see, this is the Sham'shalik, the mating dance, or dance of seduction."

"What? A dance of seduction? On *Vulcan*?" McCoy could not believe it.

Sarek cleared his throat and explained, "Do not misunderstand the term used by my wife, Doctor. There is absolutely no comparison between the Sham'shalik and, say, the Rigellian mating dances, or the questionable gesticulations of the female Orion dancers."

"Naturally, no comparison," Professor Sradek said primly. "This dance of seduction, for want of a better term, is a relic of our past, Doctor McCoy, from the time of the primitive nomadic tribes. Then, the females often outnumbered the males, and competition was high between them to obtain the favour of their mates. Hence the origin of this dance. Nowadays, of course, it has only a symbolic significance, and is considerably more restrained, as you can see for yourself."

"Mmmm... looks pretty alluring to me," the Doctor remarked, watching the

ladies dance around their partners with small gliding steps and sinuous movements of their arms. The contrast was striking between their enticing, undulating gait and the restrained movements of the men, who danced, arms crossed at their backs, with proud gravity.

So far as McCoy could judge Kirk was doing all right, taking his cue from Spock, who danced next to him, but the Captain was apparently paying more attention to his attractive partner than to his steps, and who could blame him? With her bejewelled jet-black hair piled high on her head and her swirling scarlet robes, she truly was a sight for sore eyes.

Still, when it came to sheer grace and beauty, McCoy had no trouble in taking his pick, for T'Kahalin definitely eclipsed them all. The girl was a joy to behold, a vision of gold and emerald radiance weaving her luminous spell around the royal-blue figure of Spock.

Spock, as if bewitched by her seductive grace, seemed unable to take his eyes away from her while moving instinctively through the figures. Then on a change of rhythm the couples closed in and danced face to face, almost but never quite touching, in a strange seductive pattern. Spock had locked gazes with T'Kahalin, and they moved in slow motion, their eyes so full of each other that they could have been alone.

"My god!" McCoy muttered. "She really is seducing Spock!"

"Yes, so it seems," Amanda nodded appreciatively. "I never realised that your niece was such an accomplished dancer, T'Lian."

The Healer, who was observing the couple with close attention, replied quietly, "T'Kahalin's innate abilities have

naturally been cultivated since she was a child, but I admit that I have seldom seen her perform, as well as tonight. I think that the excellence of her partner has much to do with it. Your son is also a talented dancer, Amanda, quite talented indeed. Curious, though, that the Sham'shalik appears to have reciprocal effects, do you not agree?"

"You're right!" McCoy broke into a grin. "Makes you wonder who's seducing who!"

"Mutual understanding, probably," murmured Amanda, and a knowing look passed between her and Sarek.

"Probably. Most curious and interesting," said T'Lian, mildly surprised.

"Indeed," was the curt comment from T'Pau, who was following Spock's and his partner's movements with a keen, speculative look.

"Well, there's nothing more natural, after all. Nice young couple, perfectly matched... Such things things happen, you know," McCoy drawled casually, thus giving the two ladies food for thought.

As it happened T'Kahalin's and Spock's apparent understanding became even more evident when, moments later, the dance came to an end and an intermission was called to give the dancers a rest.

While drinks were being circulated the couples broke up and sat around by the fire or by the fountain, where Jim Kirk, after taking leave of his fair partner, came and plumped himself down beside Spock.

"Congratulations, Jim, you dance very well," the latter said with approval.



"Come off it, Spock!" Kirk countered pleasantly. "But for the pointers you and your mother gave me, I would've been hopeless."

"You are too modest, Captain," put in T'Kahalin. "For a first time you did very well."

"You are too kind, T'Kahalin," Kirk replied. "At least I tried not to disgrace my partners, and it was fun. but..." he looked at the two in turn, "may I remind you of your promise? Will you play for us?"

"Ah yes, our promise," Spock acknowledged with a small smile. "Shall we, T'Kahalin?" he gently asked the girl, whose sparkling eyes answered him better than any words.

Having borrowed instruments and tuned them anew, the pair launched into a brilliant demonstration of what Vulcan harp music should be when played by true masters.

As he was swept away by a flow of alien and compelling harmonies Kirk remembered what Spock had once told him and McCoy of the Vulcans' constant quest for beauty and perfection. He was not an expert, but he could tell from his own impressions and from the rapt faces of the listeners that something like perfection was being attained there, and he felt all at once overwhelmed and very proud for his Vulcan friend.

From the two harps the musicians' untiring fingers called forth an amazing variety of musical pieces, simple, popular melodies which they elaborated into an infinity of variations, or more complicated themes proposed by T'Kahalin and which Spock developed with the precision of a mathematical demonstration. At times, with a lively tune they sent the young people back to

dancing, or after a pause they sang some Ni-Var duets, a classical expression of Vulcan art, and Kirk was touched by the perfect attunement of their voices, T'Kahalin's mezzo-soprano blending admirably with Spock's rich baritone

But what struck him most was when, following another pause, T'Kahalin swept a series of chords, then began playing a simple, austere melodic line. A bright tenor voice, that of her brother Sirvann, took it up and vocalised on the theme, then Spock's deep voice joined in, singing a counterpoint. Then more voices joined in, and soon they had the whole group singing a chant, solemn and soaring like a hymn. And when the whole assembly of Vulcans, men and women, joined in chorus, the Captain was so impressed that he could not help but steal a glance at McCoy, and saw that the fastidious Doctor looked as stupefied and moved as he did himself.

Amazing Vulcans, who denied themselves all feelings, and yet who had the gift of rousing such strong emotions in others. Who could imagine that a people as dispassionate, exacting and - yes - as insufferable in their superior logic could produce music of such inspiration? That, perhaps, was the Vulcan paradox.

CHAPTER 8

A few days after the Mav'Ikman a sign affixed to the door of a small residence in ShiKahr warned passers-by and callers that the Lady T'Kahalin was not to be disturbed for the next few days.

This was the musician's habit when she was working in preparation for a recital or concert with the Philharmonic Orchestra, and naturally no-one would presume to trespass on her privacy.

Certain of being on her own in the peace and quiet of her home with only the birds for company, T'Kahalin had donned cool leisure wear, white knee-length tunic, long pants and light sandals, and she looked neat and lovely as she sat cross-legged, surrounded by her musical instruments and reams of blank sheets in readiness for composition.

She had in mind some interesting themes which she proposed to develop into musical pieces, a suite for orchestra, or perhaps a symphonic poem. One particular leit-motiv had kept running in her head since the Mav'ikman, when Spock had brought it up on his harp in one of their improvisations. The melodic line was beautiful in its stark simplicity and intriguing in its potential for infinite combinations and variations, almost as if there lay under the spare elegance of the phrase, and as yet unexplored, a mine of creative possibilities, or endless harmonies.

Curious - that description could well apply to the composer whose dual nature provided T'Kahalin with an inexhaustible source of fascinating observations. Illogical! Such a comparison was improper and irrelevant. Yet was it, really? When she could no longer ignore the hidden depths which lay as yet unexplored beneath Spock's calm and courteous formality? When she was allowed the signal favour of a glimpse into his mysterious personality when their eyes met and held so compellingly? They said that a work of art reflects the soul of its creator. Then, logically, Spock's music was a reflection of his soul, was it not?

Absentmindedly T'Kahalin reached for her harp and let her fingers brush the strings. As if of their own volition they picked out the same tune that had haunted her, that pure, austere melody which she insensibly intertwined with

variations of her own while her mind drifted back to the night when she and Spock had danced and made music together.

Incredible! He not only remembered her after two long years of absence, but he had brought his friends to her concert; he had even seemed pleased to renew their acquaintance and their musical complicity. And she would never forget they way he had looked at her when they danced the Sham'shalik. Strange, how the very evocation of his dark gaze seemed to produce peculiar vibrations in her chest. Strange... and disturbing.

In order to dispel such unseemly sensations T'Kahalin drew in a deep breath, went through a brief mental exercise, then picking up some sheets of paper firmly shut her mind to all matters save the task at hand, and began the notation of the theme's variations even as they sprang to life under her fingers.

The musician was so deeply lost in the throes of composition that she did not hear the faint click of the garden gate, nor the footsteps crossing her small patio. It was only when a long shadow fell on the floor at her feet that she raised her eyes with a start. In the doorway, silhouetted against the outer glare, stood a dark, cloaked figure.

Surprised, and somewhat annoyed at being interrupted, T'Kahalin watched the person step in and draw back the hood, revealing a beautiful, haughty face which she knew only too well.

"T'Pring?" Putting her harp aside, she rose to her feet.

The tone of surprise and disapproval which she could not keep from her voice was not lost on the intruder, who said coldly, "Greetings, T'Kahalin. I apologise for this intrusion, but it is imperative that

I talk to you before leaving Vulcan."

"Oh, indeed?" was T'Kahalin found to say.

"I know that my presence is unexpected and unwelcome," T'Pring went on loftily. "Personally I would rather have avoided this meeting, but I felt it my duty to talk to you in confidence."

"Indeed," repeated T'Kahalin, whose face betrayed nothing of the distrust mixed with a certain curiosity which she felt at the moment, and she waited, calm and aloof.

"Yes, I came against my better judgement, for there are certain facts which you ought to know for your own good."

As T'Kahalin's eyebrows, raised in polite disbelief, seemed her only response, T'Pring continued, taking a step forward, "I must warn you against the man whose deeds have led me to the precarious situation to which I am now reduced. I would not wish you are anyone to be deceived as I have been deceived by that man, and you must know..."

"What are you talking about?" broke in T'Kahalin, radiating disapproval.

"Don't you understand? I'm talking about Spock!" T'Pring replied waspishly.

T'Kahalin stiffened in shock, but her visitor went on, "I have been told that you and Spock have been seen much together lately, and that he pays you special attention. Whatever his designs upon you may be, beware, T'Kahalin. Spock is a half-breed, remember; behind his deceptive Vulcan facade lurks a degenerate being born of Human stock. Do not trust him. Spock is corrupt and

disloyal like his Human forebears. Do not believe what he..."

"Kroykah! That is enough!" T'Kahalin's unsteady voice and ashen face betrayed her agitation.

T'Pring, congratulating herself on the success of her ruse, nodded with feigned commiseration. "I understand. It is not always pleasant to hear the naked truth, or to see one's delusions shattered, but I trust that my experience may be of service to you, and my warning spare you the mental sufferings which I endured when I was linked to Spock's perverted mind. Then my efforts will not be in vain."

The two women eyed each other while T'Kahalin brought herself, her anger, her deep sense of outrage, under control. She took a long, shuddering breath then said in a voice edged with distaste, "I suppose that I owe you some gratitude for taking the trouble to warn me against Commander Spock, but you have been misinformed, T'Pring. Ours is purely a social relationship; we are cousins from the same Clan, as you are certainly aware, nothing more. Spock has no view upon me, not have I upon him. Should I have, it would be presumptuous indeed, for he is far above me. And so your... revelations... serve no purpose except to show you in your true light. How you dared come and vilify Spock to my face is more than I can comprehend. No, hear me out, T'Pring! You have had your say, now let me have mine. You have truly surpassed yourself today. How could you imagine that I, or anyone, would believe your accusations? I am surprised at you. I would have thought you to have more discernment, but then your thirst for revenge must have warped your judgement."

"How dare you speak to me in that tone!" hissed T'Pring.

"And how dared *you* speak of Spock as you just did?" countered the other, her indignation boiling to the surface. "For years you have intrigued against him, but you have failed, T'Pring; all your cunning schemes have failed and brought you nothing but shame and disgrace. So now in one last attempt you try to destroy his good name by resorting to despicable slander. How illogical! Did you not realise that accusations levelled at Spock and coming from you have no value whatsoever? How little you know your own people! You have wasted your time and mine, T'Pring. I only trust that in the future and wherever you may be, your undertakings will be more rational and more respectable. I wish you well, despite the wrong you have done, but now do me the favour of leaving my house. I have no desire to prolong this interview."

T'Pring, defeated but undaunted, retorted in icy tones, "Nor I! I shall gladly relieve you of my presence, but allow me one more word. You cannot deceive me, T'Kahalin. For all your righteous denials, I know that you want Spock as much as he wants you. I have seen you together; I have seen the way he looks at you. I have been bonded, and I know. There are signs so revealing as to be unmistakable. But let me tell you this!" T'Pring paused and directed a look of pure venom at T'Kahalin, who stared in shock and confusion at the disclosures.

"Do not delude yourself," T'Pring continued implacably. "You will not have Spock. You will not take from me what should have been mine."

"Yours, T'Pring?" T'Kahalin countered with barely controlled anger. "Then why did you reject him when he came to you for bonding? Why did you arrange to have him killed on the Ha'aka Hill? Your logic is failing, T'Pring."

"My logic is unimpaired, and what

passed between Spock and me is no concern of yours!" T'Pring, caught in her obsession and contradictions, replied arrogantly. "I tell you Spock belongs to me by right; you shall not have him!"

Sickened and confused, T'Kahalin could only shake her head and murmur, "You are not in your right mind, T'Pring. No, I shall not listen to one more word from you. Go now. Please go away." She turned away.

"I will... but not alone!" said the cold voice behind her, and the next moment T'Kahalin dropped unconscious to the floor.

A few minutes later a small skimmer took off from a quiet back yard and swept over the rooftops of ShiKahr heading for the desert.

Sitting at the controls, T'Pring spared a scornful glance at the limp form lying on the floor beside her. The fool! It had been so easy! A master stroke, indeed. In one move she had achieved her most coveted ambitions: the elimination of the woman whose presence in Spock's entourage had become a source of growing irritation; and a final but definite revenge on Spock, a last blow before leaving her home world.

Revenge - an illogical concept for a Vulcan, admittedly, but so rewarding when satisfied at last. T'Pring heaved a sigh of complacency and allowed a small smile to play on her lips.

When all had seemed lost for her, an auspicious combination of circumstances had worked in her favour. Amanda and those interfering Humans were away from town, while Spock and Sarek were engaged in endless debates at the High Council. Moreover, her sentence of banishment had been delayed, and no restriction had been set on her

movements. Finally there was that notice on T'Kahalin's door, a notice requiring privacy for the next three days, which mean that when her absence was discovered she, T'Pring, would be well away.

It was an opportune idea which had prompted her to come and gain entry to T'Kahalin's house. True, her attempt at discrediting Spock in the other woman's eyes had failed, but by a clever move she had turned the scale to her advantage, and before long Spock would learn what it cost to offend her.

A sigh and a movement drew her attention to her victim, who seemed about to regain consciousness. It was too soon, there was still some way to go. With cold determination T'Pring reached out and her fingers dug into the base of T'Kahalin's slender neck.

That should keep her unconscious for a sufficient time.

The desert of Ah'Hrak, also known as The Forge, was the most extensive on Vulcan's northern hemisphere, and was also the most deadly. A few trails, a legacy from long-gone nomadic tribes still marked the hostile wasteland, but few people ventured afoot into its depths, let alone wandered off the beaten tracks, for to lose one's way there was tantamount to a death sentence. Ah'Hrak was one of the great Vulcan sights best admired from the safety and comfort of an air-conditioned flyer, provided that one kept well within the secure network of flying lanes.

And yet in one of the wildest and most remote zones of the desert the heavy silence was suddenly ripped by the purr of an engine, a purr that grew steadily into a roar as an air-car appeared in the

shimmering air of the mid-morning heat and flew over in circles as if searching for something. Then the small craft descended slowly and hovered for a moment, blasting sand and dust in all directions.

A hatch opened, and a female appeared dragging a limp body which she heaved and pushed and finally dropped down onto the sand below. The unconscious figure fell and rolled over to rest finally at the foot of a small dune, and the mini sand-slide she had set off settled around her as a whispering shroud.

T'Pring looked down from the hatchway, apparently cool and indifferent, then with a slight shrug she turned away. The hatch door snapped shut, the air-car climbed and circled, then with a roar gathered speed and soon disappeared from view.

And there was nothing left in the desert, nothing but the silence, the scorching heat, and the motionless girl half buried under the sand.

* * * * *

It was about mid-morning in the lush Tsai'Kal Valley when a young man walked across the paddock of the plantation, pushed open the door of the stable and looked in.

"Dr McCoy?" he called, peering in the dim light.

"Here, son. What is it?" answered a voice amid sounds of stamping and shifting.

"Commander Spock, sir."

"Spock? Has he arrived yet?" McCoy emerged from a stall, a large basket in hand.

"No, Doctor, he is calling from ShiKahr. he is asking for Captain Kirk, but the Captain has not yet returned. perhaps you would take the call?"

"Sure, on my way." McCoy set his basket down well out of reach of the long-necked mares and patted one small fluffy head, saying, "Just you wait a minute, my precious, I'll be right back," then he followed Xan to the steward's office.

The good Doctor had been engaged in what had become his favourite pastime on the Tsai'Kal farm, the feeding and pampering of the chack mares and their adorable young. On their first visit to Spock's estate he had immediately fallen for the gentle animals, and he never failed to pay a prolonged visit to the stables every morning.

In his father's office Xan switched on the com unit which he had left on hold and said, "Here is Dr McCoy, Spock."

"Hi, Spock," McCoy said, sitting down. "Still in ShiKahr? What's keeping you? That business at the High Council not finished yet?"

"Good morning, Doctor. No, they have not reached any final decision yet, and I must be available during the debates, so I shall not join you before tomorrow evening, or the following morning."

"Well that's just too bad. Your mother - who's still at the Springs, by the way - won't be best pleased when she hears that. That's not exactly the sort of convalescence your doctors ordered, Spock. You were supposed to take it easy, remember."

"I know, but it cannot be helped, Doctor, and I assure you that my physical condition is satisfactory."

"Well, so you say, but you don't look as fresh as a daisy to me!" McCoy grumbled, peering at the screen where Spock's face appeared drawn with fatigue. "Mind that you don't forget to eat and sleep properly at least."

"Thank you, Doctor, but you can rest easy in the respect. T'Mina and Staurak are both making sure of that," Spock replied dryly.

"Good for them," McCoy grinned, then said, "Jim's going to miss you; he was expecting you for lunch. He left early this morning for a ride with Shoran over the hills somewhere. He really is taken with that mare of yours, Morning Star - rides her for hours."

"I am glad," Spock said with approval. "And you, Doctor? Have you found some recreations to your liking at the farm?"

"Sure. there's plenty here to keep me occupied, besides siesta. Why, in the morning I take a stroll in the gardens, and then I go feed the chacks. They sure know me by now."

"Indeed? Interesting. However, I recommend you not to overfeed them, especially the young. They are on a strict diet, and you should conform to the grooms' instructions."

"I know, Spock, and that's exactly what I am doing," McCoy countered with some impatience. "Don't worry about your precious chacks. I'm not likely to make them ill - I'm a doctor, dammit!"

"That is precisely my point, Doctor," Spock replied dead-pan. "You are a doctor, not a veterinary. Spock out."

With that parting shot McCoy was left to stomp out of the room muttering, "Damned Vulcan! Thinks he knows all

the answers!"

* * * * *

The red giant Eridani rode high in Vulcan's burning sky and blasted the Ah'hkak with its lethal beams. The desert rippled in the heat waves which distorted the horizon and gave the solitary figure, a mere speck in the sizzling immensity, the illusion that cool water lay just ahead, just beyond reach. T'Kahalin trudged along wearily, stifled by the hot smell of the sand, scorched by the merciless sun which made a mockery of her light clothes.

She had torn a strip of fabric from her tunic and fashioned a hood with it to protect her eyes, nose and mouth from the blinding swirls of sand and dust whipped into her face by gusts of wind.

After a brief and regrettable surge of panic when she had regained consciousness and realised the extent of her predicament, T'Kahalin had coolly assessed her situation and come to the logical conclusion that it was precarious, to say the least. She was lost, somewhere in the desert, and no-one was likely to report her missing for several days. Not being adept at trekking, she was not familiar with the vast deserts surrounding ShiKahr, and did not know where she was.

Wherever she looked, as far as she could see in the glare, there was nothing to give her a clue as to her whereabouts, only sand dunes rolling away to infinity, and here and there long flat stretches of stones and rocky outcrops. If she climbed to the top of those rocks, perhaps she could orientate herself and find her way to ShiKahr?

T'Kahalin had set off bravely, despite the fiery sand which scorched the soles of her sandals and blistered her feet, and the

dust raised by her steps that burned her eyes and throat. She knew that she had little chance of survival, but come what may she would go on so long as her strength would allow.

As she plodded on a thought kept haunting her feverish mind. Why... why did T'Pring resort to violence against her? How could she, a Vulcan, commit such a betrayal? Out of revenge against Spock? If so, why? Why had T'Pring made use of her to avenge herself on Spock? Did she think that T'Kahalin's fate meant so much to him?

T'Kahalin, who had never met such unadulterated hatred and jealousy in anyone, let alone a Vulcan, was out of her depths. And yet she could not help but wonder... What if T'Pring had been right? What if Spock really *did* care for her? Alas, she would never know...

* * * * *

Under President Sholek's chairmanship a momentous discussion was in progress in the High Hall of the Supreme Council. It was the last of a series of long and heated debates that had kept the Councillors in session for the last three days. Actually Sholek, whose patience was legendary but not inexhaustible, had firmly stated that a final decision was to be made at this last sitting and preferably by consensus. Failing that, the question would be put to the vote and settled by a majority decision. So once again opposing arguments went flying back and forth as the die-hards, the Traditionalists, fought a last-ditch battle.

"The 'Old Guard' still have some resources left, do they not?" Professor Sradek, who was sitting beside him, whispered in Spock's ear.

"They have indeed," Spock replied, his

eyes on the speaker, a stern, ascetic-looking man who had been particularly unpleasant when he had subjected him to questioning.

"They can delay the procedures as much as they like, but in the end they will have to yield to the majority."

"Do you really think so?" Spock raised an eyebrow.

"Of course," replied Sradek. "Traditions are all very well, but if they conflict with the tenets of Surak and threaten the peace of Vulcan, then they must be abolished. The sooner they realise that, the better."

Spock gave his old mentor a quizzical glance and remarked, "If they do, we shall have the speech you gave yesterday to thank. I have seldom heard a more enlightening and incisive address, Professor."

"Yes, I believe that some Councillors were not exactly pleased with my plain speaking," Sradek said with satisfaction, "but then one cannot please everyone, and certain things needed to be said, whether they like it or not. But as I recall, your father did not mince his words either, as the Humans say."

"Sir?!" said Spock, mildly shocked. "I did not know you were familiar with that Terran idiom."

"One must never miss an opportunity to broaden one's knowledge, my boy," the old man replied sententiously, adding confidently, "I learned that one from your Dr McCoy. A fascinating character, is he not?"

"Indeed, sir," Spock said, straight-faced though inwardly much amused.

By now however Sarek was holding

the floor and countering the opposing arguments with his usual skill.

"Do not misunderstand me, Xuroc," he was saying. "Of course we must abide by our traditions! They are the very foundations of our culture. But I repeat, the warriors' customs, which you prize so highly, often compel our young men to commit unacceptable acts of violence. How can we expect our fellow-citizens to hold by Surak's precepts of peace and logic, and at the same time demand their observance of barbaric rites from our Dark Ages? That is illogical! Is the D'Alík'Tal of a few days past not a sufficient illustration for you of that absurdity? What more do you need to open your eyes to the stark reality? You were not on the Ha'Aka Hill, Xuroc! You have not seen the appalling outcome of that duel, the wounds, the bloodshed. I have. I was there, and I tell you, these savage rites must be abandoned or else the teaching of Surak can have no more meaning for Vulcan!"

A deep silence followed Sarek's compelling eloquence, a silence suddenly broken by a cold voice saying,

"You object to the D'Alík'Tal because your half-Vulcan son did not come out unscathed. A pure Vulcan would certainly have..."

Exclamations covered the voice, then subsided when Sholek stood up and knocked sharply on his pulpit.

"Councillors," he said sternly, "we have had enough of these pointless arguments which only serve to confuse the issue. Let me point out, however, that to my knowledge the D'Alík'Tal was *won* by the half-Vulcan over the full Vulcan, not the other way about." A murmur of amused appreciation followed his dry remark, then he went on, "This being said, we shall now proceed to the vote

after a fifteen minute intermission. The Council is now in recess."

The Councillors rose to their feet and moved about, or engaged in conversation. Spock, seeing that Sradek was likewise engaged, stood up and made for the door. He suddenly felt the need to be alone, away from these endless discussions, if only for a few minutes.

As he walked past T'Pau she stopped him and gave him one of her penetrating gazes. "Spock, are you going home?"

"I don't think I can, T'Pau. I am at the service of the Council for the duration of the session."

"Nonsense!" she replied curtly. "The Council has no more need of you. You have given them all the information they requested, so you can leave now. And do not be concerned over the vote - reason will prevail."

"So be it, T'Pau." With a slight bow Spock departed, wondering at this unprecedented favour granted by the exacting Matriarch. Perhaps she possessed more compassion than she was generally credited with.

Anyway, Spock was thankful to leave the Council Hall. A curious feeling of unease was troubling him, all the more disquieting since he could not trace its cause, other than the intense cross-examination he had been subjected to over the last three days.

It was late afternoon when Spock emerged from a long and relaxing swim in the pool and made his way to the meditation enclosure. Sinking onto the stone bench, he had to admit that McCoy's diagnosis, although poetically expressed, had been essentially correct he

was not quite recovered from the after-effects of the duel, and the prying Councillors with their endless questioning had done nothing to improve his condition.

He felt utterly weary, physically and mentally, and longed for the peaceful Tsai'Kal Valley and the company of Jim. Tomorrow, after a good night's sleep, he would join his friends and spend what leave he had left with them.

But as he focused on the familiar pattern of the green stones set on the raked sand in preparation for a much-needed mediation, an image intruded on his mind, the image of a female with golden-green eyes, dancing and moving with fascinating grace. Spock sighed. It seemed that of late his mental processes were becoming quite irrational. Since the Mav'Ikan he had found himself thinking of her more and more frequently, a highly disturbing situation... and yet curiously pleasant.

T'Kahalin... New Dawn... An appropriate name for a lovely and talented person whose looks were on a par with her accomplishments. To any Vulcan male, even the most fastidious, she would make the perfect mate...

Spock gave himself a mental shake. What kind of thought was that? Highly improper, and certainly no concern of his! But as he firmly channelled his thoughts into a more seemly direction that feeling of unease crept into his mind again - then was gone, leaving him with the vague impression that somewhere, something was wrong.

Curiously these feelings did not match the mental patterns he was familiar with. Could they come from someone he had never melded with? Someone whose mind had an affinity with his own? Hardly. It was not T'Pring, that much was

certain. Their childhood link was definitely severed.

Then, T'Kahalin, perhaps? Unlikely, for according to her brother she was at home closeted with her harps and her music, preparing for her next concert. Should he call on her on his way to Tsai'Kal and make certain that all was well with her, if only to set his mind at rest? That it was but a lame excuse to pay T'Kahalin a call Spock did not even pause to consider and, his decision made, he slipped into the levels of mediation leading to relaxation and inner peace.

* * * * *

The sky was fire from horizon to horizon. Not a breath of wind stirred on the desert crushed under the oppressive heat of Eridani. And yet a lone figure plodded on slowly, doggedly along an almost invisible trail. Her skin was burned, her parched throat and lips were on fire with thirst. The sharp, uneven stones of the trail cut through the soles of her sandals and made her blistered feet bleed.

T'Kahalin went on, denying the pain. She felt that if she stopped for a rest she could not set off again. She had discovered the old trail from the top of outcrop which she had so painfully climbed the day before, and for want of a better sign had followed the path, hoping it might lead somewhere. She also looked for shelter for the night, for she dreaded going again through the experience of the previous night, which she had spent curled up the the fold of a dune, shivering with cold and apprehension, listening to the howling of predators stalking their prey - and what better prey than a defenceless woman who could hardly walk, let alone run.

The stars, twinkling serenely high up in the sky, had been kind to her, and so

had the strong night breeze, which had blown steadily in her favour, keeping her scent from the roaming le-matya which growled and fought savagely over some game but a short distance away.

Despite her fatigue she had been unable to rest, or to retreat into a light healing trance, and she had kept vigil, attentive to sounds and movements around her, and had gazed up at the glorious spectacle of the Vulcan night until from sheer exhaustion she finally fell into a fitful slumber.

Now she was trying to reach, before night, the hills which rose in the distance - provided that those hills were not mere illusions, mirages like the oasis which appeared and disappeared on the horizon. Uncertain though she was of their reality, she had decided to go and find out. She could feel her strength declining steadily, but was no less determined.

* * * * *

Spock, clad in tan desert suit and boots, dropped his bag into the hold of his air-car, then sitting at the controls began plotting a course to the Tsai'Kal Valley, when the sight of Sarek's Secretary running towards him made him pause. Intrigued by the young man's behaviour Spock let the hatch door slide open.

Sirvann looked in saying breathlessly, "Sorry to delay your departure, sir, but a communication just came in for you. I thought it might be important."

"You did right. Who is it from?"

"I do not know. The message is locked under voice-code, and programmed so as not to be accessed for two hours - an unusual procedure."

"Most unusual indeed." Spock raised

an eyebrow, and getting out of the craft stroke briskly back to the house. "Where?" he asked quietly, for it was early yet; Eridani was barely peeping over the horizon, and the household was not yet astir.

"In the study, sir, locked into the main com terminal. I was on my way in when I heard the signal."

"Good timing," Spock commented, sitting at his father's desk while Sirvann slipped away discreetly.

As he began to break through the delaying security lock, Spock could not help but wonder who would go to such lengths in taking precautions, and especially in delaying the delivery of the message, and for what purpose? Certainly not Starfleet. The High Command had more sophisticated methods of despatching classified messages under security codes. Who indeed? It was most odd.

After a few seconds work, child's play for an expert like Spock, the message was unlocked, decoded, and he sat and stared in disbelief at the screen, where the proud face of T'Pring came into view. After a pause the image came to life and she delivered her message with her cold and precise diction.

"Greetings, Spock. When you receive this call I shall be on my way to exile because of you and those of your House. Security Officers are coming shortly to escort me to Vulcan Space Central and see me off my home planet.

"This is not a farewell call, Spock, for indeed I do not wish you and your kin peace and long life. Quite the contrary! I want you to know that you cannot oppose me with impunity. So far you have won, but beware, Spock - I always repay the wrong done to me.

"And now, as a parting gift, let me give you some advice. If you propose to attend T'Kahalin's next concert, do not take the trouble - it will certainly be cancelled. Did you not know? Your musician, with whom you seem so taken, is unavailable. She is gone, Spock. Gone, you understand? Never to return!" T'Pring's lips curved in a tiny smile of triumph as she delivered her parting shot. "And I hope you grieve for her for the rest of your life!"

The screen blanked, and a few seconds went by as Spock sat motionless, numb with shock. Closing his eyes he tried to discipline his tangled thoughts, to grasp the meaning of T'Pring's words. Words of spite, words of contempt... what was new? But from that hatred one thing stood out, one name blazed in his mind with blinding clarity. T'Kahalin. She had said that T'Kahalin was gone, never to return...

Spock shuddered as the strange sensations of disquiet rushed back to his mind with a tragic significance he now understood only too well. T'Kahalin was in danger, dying perhaps, and T'Pring...

In his anguish Spock felt a sudden knot of anger inside himself, a killing rage flaring and taking possession of his being as he fully realised what T'Pring had dared to do.

By all the ancient gods, she will pay for this!

He stood up abruptly, clenching his fists, and clamped down on his surging emotions. *Control... Control...* He had to think, to take prompt action... Perhaps it was not too late... Perhaps there was still a chance... But what he needed first was facts, a confirmation of his dread.

Spock strode into the small office next door. "Sirvann!" he called.

"Sir?" The secretary looked up from his desk.

"Sirvann, I have a question. It may seem inquisitive, but I have a good reason to ask. Have you seen your sister recently?"

If Sirvann was surprised he did not show it and replied, "No, Commander. She asked not to be disturbed for a few days. She is currently rehearsing her concert."

"Yes, I am aware of that. Nevertheless, I recommend that you call her immediately," Spock said grimly.

"Very well, sir." Sirvann complied at once and placed the call, but his curiosity got the better of him. "May I ask if you have reason to believe that T'Kahalin may not be at home?"

"I have good reason to believe she may have come to harm. The message I just received was from T'Pring, and from what she says, I fear for your sister."

The flash of alarm which sprang into the young man's eyes told Spock that he need say no more. As there was no answer to the call Sirvann tried again and again, then finally looked up with troubled eyes.

"She does not reply."

"That is what I was afraid of," Spock said, then he drew a deep breath and added with cold determination, "Very well. There is but one way to find out what befell your sister. T'Pring knows, and she must tell."

"But I do not understand. Why should T'Pring harm T'Kahalin?"

Spock's eyes softened as he met Sirvann's troubled gaze. "Why indeed?"

he murmured, then turning on his heel he left the room.

Sirvann caught up with him in the hall. "Commander, shall I go with you?" he asked.

"No, better not. This is my responsibility, Sirvann, something between T'Pring and me."

"I understand," the young man said quietly.

He was opening the front door to let Spock out when a deep voice made them turn.

"Spock? I thought you had already left." Sarek was coming downstairs, looking mildly surprised. "Is anything the matter?"

"Yes, Father. It seems that T'Kahalin has disappeared, and I strongly suspect T'Pring of being responsible," Spock stated bluntly, startling his father out of his Olympian calm.

"Spock! Do you realise the enormity of your accusation?"

"I do, sir, but I also know what she is capable of. The message she sent me, which you will find on your desk, leaves me in no doubt. With your permission, I must go now."

"Wait! Where are you going?"

"To T'Pring, Father. I must obtain the truth from her."

"But you cannot, Spock. Let the Security Officers deal with her. I shall call the Security Department immediately." Sarek turned to go, but was stopped by Spock's sharp command.

"No! No, Father. Let no-one interfere."

It is imperative that I see T'Pring in private, and I must act alone. T'Kahalin's life is at stake."

Before Sarek could protest further Spock was gone, and within seconds his air-car could be heard taking off and speeding away.

The Ambassador, somewhat ruffled at having just been given orders by his own son, gathered his dignity about him and looked enquiringly at his secretary, who seemed about to leave too. "And where are you going?"

"With your permission, sir, to my sister's house, to try and find evidence as to her present whereabouts, although from what Spock said..." His voice trailed off in obvious concern.

"Yes," Sarek said heavily. "This is a most distressing situation, but we must not draw hasty conclusions. Perhaps there is a simple explanation for T'Kahalin's absence. let us wait until we hear from Spock. In the meantime, by all means go and gather what evidence you can find and make enquiries. I shall wait here." Sarek, inwardly much perturbed, retreated to his den.

Somehow, and despite recent and painful experience of T'Pring's capacity for mischief, Sarek still could not believe her to be so callous, so devoid of honour as to go to the lengths of deliberately causing T'Kahalin harm, but when a few moments later he switched off the tape of her message, he could no longer question Spock's accusation. There was, alas, no doubt about T'Pring's guilt, no limit to her wickedness.

* * * * *

Meanwhile T'Pring was sitting by her fire and idly watching the leaping flames devour the last batch of papers that she

did not care to leave lying about after she had gone. She had been warned to expect the Security Officers early that morning, and had been waiting, packed and ready, since dawn.

She was indeed ready to leave Vulcan and all her frustrated expectations behind her. She had left all her affairs in order, and had even indulged, a moment ago, in one last sweet revenge on Spock. She had sent him a delayed message to be delivered only when she would be well away. She had not been able to resist the satisfaction of letting him know without any doubt whom he had to thank for the loss of that girl T'Kahalin. A last and perfect revenge indeed.

The whine of a skimmer soft-landing just outside her door made her raise her head. Already? Sooner than she had expected, but it did not matter. She was prepared, and the sooner she left the better.

Voices sounded in the hall, footsteps approached, but T'Pring remained seated, for it would not do to appear too hasty. there was a soft knock, and her old maiden aunt peered round the door, looking strangely flustered.

"T'Pring, I cannot..." she began, but was firmly pushed aside, the door was flung open, and T'Pring's eyes widened in shock as a tall, tan-suited man walked in.

"Spock?" she breathed, and rose slowly to her feet.

"Obviously I was not expected," Spock remarked dryly, then looking at the old lady still hovering in the doorway he said, "Will you please go."

"Certainly not!" She eyed him with disfavour. "This intrusion is unacceptable, Spock, and your conduct most improper."

"When it comes to improper behaviour, believe me, you have a far better example in T'Pring than in me," Spock rejoined. "I must see her in private, so you may go."

"I shall do not such thing. You cannot see T'Pring alone," the old lady retorted.

"I can and I will. You are wasting my time, T'Dona. Leave us now!"

There was something in his cold glare and command tone that told the woman that further objection might be unwise, so she hastily beat a retreat and closed the door behind her.

T'Pring meantime had recovered some of her poise, and was coldly eyeing Spock across the room. "Is it to bid me a safe journey that you force your way into my house?" she asked frostily.

Spock returned look for look and replied, "I have come for an explanation. What have you done to T'Kahalin? Where is she?"

T'Pring bit her lip. "Oh, so you have accessed my message."

"Of course I have. Did you think your futile delaying tactics would be proof against my experience? Rather presumptuous, don't you think? This tendency you have of overestimating yourself is irrational and foolish, T'Pring." He watched her flush at his deliberate insult and continued sternly, "Now, answer me. Where is T'Kahalin?"

"T'Kahalin? How should I know? Somewhere in the desert, I presume," she replied with assumed indifference.

"In the desert?" Spock's heart sank. "What do you mean? Explain!"

"What is there to explain? That is

where I saw her last. But why trouble yourself over her? There must not be much left of her by now."

Her cruel smile left Spock speechless. As he stared at her flawless beauty a burning sensation rose in his throat, something as sudden as it was frightening: hatred such as he had never known himself capable of.

But seeing in her mocking eyes that he was being intentionally provoked, Spock somehow mastered his emotion and went on grimly, "You dared abandon T'Kahalin in the desert? When was that? Answer me!"

T'Pring paused and considered that she had nothing to lose, being already sentenced to Vulcan's extreme penalty, so she coolly replied, "Three, perhaps four days ago," and was rewarded by the sight of Spock's livid face.

"Four days?" he repeated in disbelief. "Four days alone in the desert? Have you gone insane? Do you realise what it means?"

"I am perfectly sane," she snapped, "and I know what it means. Do not delude yourself, Spock - you will never see her alive again."

A wave of bitterness and grief washed over Spock as he murmured, "I did not think you would sink so low."

The contempt in his voice was crushing, and made her bristle with resentment. "Who are you to judge me? You are so arrogant, but you have only yourself to blame. You knew I wanted you, but you rejected me, so I decided to take from you what you took from me. You would not have me for a mate, so I saw to it that you would not have her."

It was not a burning black anger that

Spock felt, and a violent urge to wipe that satisfied smile off her face once and for all, but she had the information that he desperately needed; only she knew where T'Kahalin was, so once more taking a firm grip on his temper he strode up to her and said tightly,

"For what you have done there is no excuse, T'Pring, but if you have a grain of common sense left in you, you must realise that it is in your best interests to tell me the truth. For the last time, answer me! Where is T'Kahalin?"

For a few heartbeats the two glared at each other in silence, then deliberately turning her back on Spock, T'Pring replied in a dismissive tone, "I do not remember."

That was the last straw. Suddenly possessed by a cold fury, Spock grabbed her arm and spinning her round to face him said through clenched teeth, "You will give me the information now, willingly, or I will take it from you," and long fingers hovered purposefully over her face.

T'Pring, eyes wide in apprehension, shrank back, but Spock tightened his grip. "Tell me the truth, or I shall force it from you!"

"You cannot! The officers will be here at any moment; they will prevent you."

"No, they will not. There is no-one to interfere, only you and me, T'Pring."

There was something so ominous in his tone that she changed colour. "No!" she gasped. "You would not dare. You would not force a meld on me, against all the Rules of ethics!"

"You, T'Pring?" Spock allowed himself a small smile of contempt. "You, who have broken our Laws many times over,

you dare to claim the Rules of Ethics? You surprise me! But you need not fear a mind probe. That is a crime, and I shall not sink to your level. Moreover, I find the idea of joining minds with you perfectly revolting. There are, however, other methods, just as effective, for extracting the truth from a reluctant subject. Did you know that, T'Pring?"

Before the frightened girl could react she found herself pinned to the wall, her jaw roughly grasped by fingers of steel, and she was forced to look into the dark burning depths of Spock's eyes. A surge of fear and rage at her helplessness seized her.

"No! No, let me go!" she hissed like a fury.

She struggled desperately, trying to elude the relentless, magnetic gaze boring into her with a frightening force... in vain. She felt herself irresistibly drawn into those dark fathomless pools and swept away in a dizzy descent... and then lost all sense of time, of space, of feeling except for the insistent voice coming from far away and repeating endlessly,

"Where? Where is T'Kahalin? Where?"

Spock heaved a sigh and released his grasp. He seldom used his hypnotic powers. To hold a being in total subjection to his will was distasteful to a man as respectful of others as was Spock, but when it was necessary hypnotism came in useful. It had in the past, on Omega IV for instance, and it did now.

Spock knew that he would never have obtained the information from T'Pring otherwise, but there was no time to waste. A shiver ran uncontrollably through his thin frame at the thought of T'Kahalin alone, helpless in the Ah'Hrak Desert. The only way to find her quickly in that vastness was to keep T'Pring in a

hypnotic trance, board her small air-car and make her return to the exact spot where she had abandoned her victim. And then...?

Spock refused to accept the possibility of T'Kahalin's death. Against all logic, he still hoped.

* * * * *

When the two Security Officers eventually arrived at T'Pring's house to take her to Vulcan Space central, all they found was Spock's sleek skimmer sitting on the landing pad, and an outraged old lady alone in the house. Upon enquiry they were told how Commander Spock had rudely forced his way into the house and carried T'Pring off in her own craft without a word of excuse or explanation. More outrageous conduct was yet to be seen, they were told, but then what else could be expected of a half-breed?

Intrigued, the two men took their leave, duly reporting the occurrence to their superior officer, and asked for instructions. Upon being told to stand by and wait for further orders they calmly sat in their skimmer and awaited developments.

Being Vulcans, they wasted no time in vain speculation, but as both had been on duty at the Judicial Hall during the Lia'Hanak trial, they could not help wondering what Spock meant to do with T'Pring.

* * * * *

Meantime Sarek was in communication with a visibly nonplussed Security Chief who wanted to know of he was aware of, and had any explanation for, Commander Spock's dubious actions. From information received it seemed that Spock had forcibly entered T'Pring's residence before the Security squad's

arrival and had then taken the convict away in her own craft to an unknown destination.

If this unprecedented move was, as it seemed to be, an attempt to spare T'Pring the enforcement of her sentence, then, the Chief admitted, the whole affair was beyond his comprehension. Perhaps Sarek would care to give him an explanation?

Sarek permitted himself an imperceptible sigh, then bringing into play the best of his diplomatic skills he hastened to smooth the official's ruffled feathers and confirmed his information.

Yes, his son had taken the liberty of carrying off a condemned person without advising the proper authorities of his intention, but the matter was of the utmost urgency and demanded prompt action. Spock had gone on a rescue mission in the Ah'Hrak Desert; it was a matter of life and death.

Having obtained the full attention of his questioner, Sarek calmly proceeded to explain the situation as he knew it. He added that his secretary had found undeniable evidence that his sister had been missing for some time. This evidence, combined with a message from Spock sent en route to the Forge Desert, had confirmed his worst fears. T'Pring had indeed abducted T'Kahalin, and left her to die in Vulcan's most dangerous area. Sarek finally admitted that Spock had made use of unorthodox methods to obtain the necessary information, but the fate of the Lady T'Kahalin justified drastic measures; Sarek felt sure that the Security Chief shared his view on the matter.

The Security Chief did, and offered his assistance to join in the search but Sarek, keeping Spock's recommendation in mind, demurred and pointed out that it was preferable to let Spock act alone for

the moment; any interference by a third party might affect his mental hold on T'Pring and compromise the issue. He suggested, however, that Security patrols might be positioned along the desert borders, to intervene if necessary.

The matter thus being settled, Sarek was left with the task of informing Amanda and T'Pau of the situation.

CHAPTER 9

The sun was climbing steadily above the skyline and setting the desert on fire while the skimmer hovered and circled persistently over the crests of the red sand dunes. At the controls Spock, all his energy concentrated into his eyesight, scanned the desolate vastness below.

T'Pring sat silently beside him, her gaze fixed on the horizon. While under hypnosis she had obediently followed his orders and found the way back to the place where, she said in a monotone, she had pushed T'Kahalin out of the air-car and left her to her fate.

Controlling his bitterness Spock had tested her mental state and made sure she spoke the truth, then having obtained what he wanted he released her from the trance. After a brief reaction of anger and disbelief when she realised the situation, T'Pring had retired into a sullen silence, and from then on they had ignored each other.

At first Spock had combed the dunes in the vicinity of the site, then had gradually widened the search, but so far... nothing. There was no trace of T'Kahalin, and her footprints had long since been swept away by the wind. She must have walked over a long distance... unless...

As if she sensed his anxiety T'Pring remarked scornfully, "Where is your

logic, Spock? You are wasting your time. You will not find her, the le-matya has seen to that."

"Be quiet!" Spock replied tightly. "I have all the time in the world. If she is here, I shall find her," an affirmation T'Pring chose to ignore as she resumed her disdainful pose.

It was unfortunate that private skimmers were not fitted with sensors, and Spock missed the long-range scanners on the Enterprise. Then it suddenly occurred to him that he could have called on the sensor equipment of Vulcan's orbital stations; they might have been of assistance. Instead of which, he had rushed headlong, like a Human driven by unruly emotions. A feeling of deep shame swept over Spock. Lack of judgement, lack of control... What had happened to him? Once more he had to admit that logic failed him where T'Kahalin was concerned.

Calling his wandering thoughts to order Spock topped yet another rocky outcrop and scanned the expanse on the other side. Something down below made him stir up, the trace - barely visible among the rocks and clumps of spiky bushes - of an old trail winding across the plain. Spock knew that trail from his youth, when he had haunted the desert in search of peace and solitude. Many a time he had trekked the old nomadic trails and explored the campsites and half-ruined forts of the ancient Vulcans. This footpath, now half covered by the sand, was the ancient way from ShiKahr to the Tsai Shon Dag. He recognised the few stone markers still standing along the sides.

If T'Kahalin had been able to come this far, then perhaps...? But why delude himself? Spock knew he had to face the grim reality: how could she have survived in that inferno without water, without

protection? Still, it was a possibility he could not overlook, and so Spock sent the air-car down towards the trail and began a systematic survey, flying a dozen metres above the ground to avoid throwing up dust and blotting out the track.

The had covered quite a distance, and were coming into sight of high sandstone cliffs sculpted by the wind and known as the Ringing Stones, when T'Pring broke the silence.

"Spock," she said icily, "your obstinacy is beyond all understanding. You will not find her. I demand that you cease this senseless search and take me back to ShiKahr. You would be well advised to do so, or you may regret it. Is that not a sand cloud over there?"

Spock looked up and saw, far beyond the tall cliffs, a dun-coloured mass that was moving and spreading rapidly over the desert. "Yes, it is," he replied curtly, "a sandstorm of great magnitude apparently, heading our way. But it won't be here for some time." And paying not the least attention to T'Pring's protest, Spock continued the search. He knew this was T'Kahalin's last chance. In the condition she must be in - assuming she was still alive - she would never survive one of the terrible sandstorms of the Ah'Hrak.

Minutes went by, charged with tension. At last Spock, with a heavy heart, was about to give up when he caught sight of something white emerging from the sand at the foot of a rock. Wordlessly he set the craft down on the trail, switched off the engine and opened the hatch, then looked at T'Pring, who sat staring out as if petrified.

"Stay here," he ordered, "and I hope for your sake that she is alive!" Grabbing a water flask, he jumped down and ran.

He sank to his knees beside the motionless body huddled face down against the rock, and holding his breath gently turned it over. One slim hand fell back and Spock recognised on the forefinger the bloodstone ring T'Kahalin usually wore.

Feverishly he brushed the sand away and raising her head loosed the dusty cloth from her face. His heart sank at the sight of her beauty sadly marred by the hardships of the desert. He laid trembling fingers to the base of her neck and felt for a pulse. A few anxious seconds went by, while he tried to ignore the thumping of his own heart, then at last a faint, almost imperceptible pulse beat against his fingertips, irregular but definitely there.

Spock, suddenly overwhelmed by a strange emotion, sat back on his heels and allowed himself a sigh of relief. Then feeling a hostile presence he looked up and saw T'Pring watching him in stony silence from the air-car. Without a word she returned his level gaze with a look of pure venom and backed into the craft. But now was not the time to deal with her, and Spock turned his attention back to the unconscious girl.

By means of simple Vulcan methods he succeeded in bringing her round, and as soon as her breathing became more even he gently lifted her head and brought the flask to her parched lips.

The blissful sensation of cool water running down her throat was enough to revive T'Kahalin, and her eyes opened, filled with pain and confusion. They regarded Spock with blank incomprehension; to her he was only a shadow against the blinding red sky.

Spock, deeply moved by the sight of her green-gold eyes clouded with exhaustion, brushed her tangled hair from her brow and said softly, T'Kahalin,

it is I, Spock. All is well now. You are safe."

She could not make out his features, but she knew his voice, and a faint flush crept over her hollow cheeks. "Spock?" her voice was no more than a hoarse whisper. "Spock... you found me?"

"I have found you, and now I shall take you home."

"Home... Take me home..." she sighed, an inexpressible relief in her eyes.

Spock gave her some more water, which she savoured with relish, clipped the flask to his belt, and was about to take her up in his arms when the sudden burst of engines made him swing round.

The air-car was taking off, blasting him with stones and dust. Spock instinctively threw himself in front of T'Kahalin and in disbelief watched the craft rise up rapidly, hover over them as if mocking his helplessness, then circle twice and speed away with a roar.

When the whirlwind deliberately provoked by T'Pring abated, Spock followed the shiny vessel, their only means of escape, with his eyes until it disappeared from view. What he felt now was not so much frustration as rage, a wild towering rage with T'Pring and even more with himself for having, even for only a few minutes, lowered his guard and let her get the upper hand. How *could* he have been so rash as to trust her with the air-car? Had he not learned to his cost what she was capable of? T'Kahalin's fate had prevailed over all other considerations and made him forget the most elementary precautions. His tiresome Human half had taken over again. Would he *never* learn?

But vain regrets had never served any purpose, and if Spock meant to extricate

himself and T'Kahalin from this predicament he had to think fast and act accordingly. He had found T'Kahalin alive; now it was his responsibility that she remain so.

Bringing himself back under control Spock studied the ominous sandstorm swelling and racing across the vastness and calculated that providing its speed and direction remained unchanged they just might have a chance to reach the cliff range in time. He knew of the existence of gulleys and caves in which they would be relatively secure.

Normally Sarek, not hearing from him, would have despatched search parties, but when storms raged over the desert all flights were suspended for hours, sometimes for days, so they were on their own and had to move quickly. Already the light was beginning to dim, the sun to lose colour as grey clouds raced across its disc, and a quickening breeze was stirring the sand around them. There was not a moment to spare.

All these considerations had gone through Spock's mind with lightning speed, and he turned to T'Kahalin with a sense of urgency. To his surprise she had managed to struggle to her feet, and leaning against the rock she was regarding him with confusion.

"I thought... Was that an air-car? Has it gone?" she stammered.

"Yes...and the fault is mine," Spock replied guiltily, and briefly told her the reason for their present situation, adding, "There is no excuse. I should have anticipated T'Pring's move and..."

"No, Spock," T'Kahalin cut in softly. "You could no more foresee her duplicity than I could when she came to my home. Do not blame yourself."



"You are most kind," Spock said with gratitude, "but I *am* responsible," and the look he gave her brought a delicate flush to her cheeks.

"Unfortunately," he went on, "a sandstorm is coming, and we must make haste. With your permission, I shall carry you to those hills. Will you allow me?"

T'Kahalin's flush deepened. "Perhaps I can walk... with your help," she suggested, and bravely took a few steps, but all at once her legs failed and she would have collapsed but for the strong arm that caught her just in time.

"I doubt it." Spock looked down at her with smiling eyes. "It seems that we have no choice. I must carry you. Do you trust me?"

The look she gave him then moved him to the core. "Implicitly," she said simply, and let him take her up in his arms.

Spock set off at a brisk pace, his eyes on the ominous wall of dark cloud moving towards them. No word was exchanged, but both were conscious of feelings that neither could express or even formulate to themselves. As Spock lengthened his stride he felt T'Kahalin's hand slip up and cling to his neck for support, and instinctively he tightened his hold; and when later her head, heavy with fatigue, fell gently onto his chest, as if it was the right place to be, Spock was unable to tell why a curious feeling of exhilaration had taken hold of him.

* * * * *

T'Pring also had a short while ago felt that strange and pleasant sensation, for a very different reason, of course. But that gratifying moment of complacency at her last, definitive triumph over Spock had been short-lived. Her attention had been

brutally drawn from visions of the predicament of Spock and T'Kahalin to her own no less critical situation.

So absorbed was she in self-congratulation that she had been careless, and had overlooked the sudden unpredictable shifts of L'Riset, the desert wind. One moment she was flying secure in the crimson light of Eridani, the next her craft was caught in the blinding storm and buffeted by incessant gusts of wind. T'Pring used all her skill, she fought desperately to escape, but it was too late.

Clogged by sand, the controls did not respond, and the engine faltered then stalled. The roaring gale played with the helpless vessel as with a toy, and rocked it from side to side. The obscurity was total, and T'Pring had no idea of her position. She clutched at the console for support, tears of frustration in her eyes. No! It could not be! To have come so far, to have achieved her goal... and now...

A sudden squall caught the air-car and tipped it over on its side, then the next instant another gust sent it spinning into nothingness. Beside herself with rage and terror, T'Pring screamed...

* * * * *

The scouts patrolling the boundaries of the desert duly reported the sudden rise of a sandstorm in a remote area and, acting on instructions, went to investigate. Having ascertained that no craft other than the one being used by Spock and T'Pring had ventured into the desert that morning they hovered and observed, ready to render assistance if possible.

Presently they detected an air-car coming from the direction of the Tsai Shon Dag, closely followed by the fast-moving storm. The Security Officers signalled a warning and moved in to the

rescue, but to no avail. The gale raced towards them, and they could only retreat hurriedly and watch the helpless craft being suddenly seized by the black clouds, then disappear from view. A moment later a blinding orange light which ripped through the darkness left them in no doubt as to the fate of the vessel and its passengers.

All they could do was to get away from the menacing storm and report to Headquarters.

* * * * *

Meanwhile Spock was fighting a battle of his own against the unleashed elements of Ah'Hrak. He had walked quickly, and had covered most of the distance to the hills when the clouds caught up with him, and the full fury of the sandstorm broke. In a matter of minutes the grey light had gone, replaced by a darkness so dense that even Spock's infallible sense of direction was of little help. All he could see was a wall of blinding, stinging sand all around, all he could feel was the impetus of L'Riset screaming and trying to blow him off his feet.

His greatest fear was of losing T'Kahalin, a fear she obviously shared, for despite her innate reserve she had unconsciously locked her arms about his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. He stumbled, buffeted by the gale, but continued obstinately on what was, to his best estimation, the way to the hills. Twice he fell to his knees and had to muster all his strength to regain his feet, but never did he let go of his precious burden.

Then he was on his knees again, choking and fighting for breath, when T'Kahalin's voice sounded feebly in his ear. He leaned forwards, and despite the bedlam heard her say,

"Bells... I hear bells..."

Bells? Out in the desert? Spock raised his head and strained his ears - and indeed, above the scream of the wind he perceived the barely audible sound of chimes. His pulse racing, he scrambled to his feet, for he knew what those bells meant. The Ringing Stones, the sandstone crags, so called because the wind made their gaps and crevices ring like bells. And it also meant that the hills were near, that he only had to follow the chimes to find them.

But as Spock trudged on, blinded by swirls of stinging sand, the storm raged and roared even more, as though it felt that it might finally lose its prey.

How long did it take him finally to reach the crags? Spock could not tell, having by now lost all sense of time or direction save one, that of the Ringing Stones calling out to him like a foghorn to a ship in distress.

Reeling with exhaustion, Spock hugged the face of the cliffs until he came upon a narrow canyon swept by gusts of sand, and he groped his way along, clawing at the rock, half-carrying, half-dragging the unconscious girl. He was on the verge of collapse when his hand found a gap. Pushing in, Spock tumbled into some kind of rocky niche, and passed out. There was only so much that even a Vulcan could take.

* * * * *

Ambassador Sarek sat at the viewscreen gazing at the stricken face of his wife with the sickening feeling of *deja vu*. He was recalling two years earlier, when he had broken the news to Amanda of Spock's capture by Romulans. He repressed a sigh. It seemed that adverse circumstances had an unpleasant tendency of late of recurring often - much

too often. Already the outrageous abduction of T'Kahalin had come as a shock to Amanda, and now there was the sandstorm, the probable destruction of the air-car, and no news of Spock. She was devastated.

Sarek waited patiently for his wife to calm down, and watched her dab at her eyes and draw a shaky breath.

"Sarek," she said presently, "are you sure that the air patrols are not mistaken? perhaps it was some other craft they saw in the storm?"

"No, they were quite specific. T'Pring's air-car was the only one reported in the area this morning, which tallies with the last message I received from Spock. We shall have to wait until the storm is over, but there is little hope of ever finding any trace of it. However, there is a possibility..."

"But Sarek," his wife cut him short, "why did you not call in Security in the first place? Why did you let Spock go alone?"

Sarek winced inwardly at the reproach. Amanda was at the moment too distressed to think rationally. "Because there was no way of stopping Spock," he explained calmly. "He was quite emotional about it. For some reason he believed that only he could obtain the truth from T'Pring, only he could find T'kahalin. he insisted that no-one interfere, and was gone before I could raise an objection. But as it turned out, Amanda, he did get the information, and for all we know he may well have found T'Kahalin. What no-one could foresee, unfortunately, was the outbreak of this sandstorm."

"You're right, my dear. I'm sorry." Amanda gave him a contrite look. "No-one could tell - and Spock was so

obstinate sometimes."

"I agree, but perhaps you should say *is*, not *was*, Amanda."

"But you just said that..." Amanda stammered and eyed her husband with some suspicion. "Sarek, what exactly do you mean?"

"What I was going to tell you when you interrupted me, my wife," her spouse pointed out in mild reproof. "Now please pay attention. According to eye-witnesses, T'Pring's air-car was most probably lost, but that does not necessarily mean that Spock was. I have reason to believe that he was not aboard the craft at the moment of the accident."

"My god! What makes you think that?" Amanda began, then her blue eyes widened in realisation and shone with hope. "Oh Sarek!" was all she found to say.

"Yes, the parental bond," Sarek replied quietly. "So far as I can tell, our link is not broken. If Spock was dead I should know, I should feel a rupture, a void... and I do not. Logically, therefore..."

"... Spock must still be alive," his wife concluded with a fond smile. "What a relief! But how? What do you think happened?"

"Without indulging in speculation, one can logically surmise that Spock left the air-car, possibly because he found T'Kahalin, and then T'Pring..."

He raised a meaningful eyebrow at his wife, who nodded and continued, "And T'Pring left him stranded and escaped. Quite a habit with her, I must say."

"Indeed, but as it turned out she did not get far," Sarek said soberly.

"No, indeed. She finally got her deserts, and through her own fault. What a tragic, even ironic end," Amanda remarked, and was silent for a few moments; then her thoughts returned to her son, and she asked anxiously, "But what about Spock? Have you sent out search parties?"

"That is unfortunately out of the question for the time being. We cannot risk any other craft out in that storm."

"I understand, but how will he survive? People have choked to death in sandstorms, have they not? Is there no other way to save Spock?"

"None at the moment. We must wait and hope that Spock found shelter. But you should have more confidence in his resilience. He is a Vulcan, desert-born and bred, Amanda, and quite capable of coping with the hazards of the desert, even with a sandstorm. He passed the Kahs-Wan with success when he was seven; all the more reason for him to survive now, when he is in the prime of life. But rest assured, I will have him sought with sensor scans as soon as the atmospheric conditions allow, and naturally I am in mental contact with him.

"Which brings me to another important matter. We have proof that T'Kahalin is alive. Sirvann reached her mind but a moment ago. It was a brief and very weak contact, but clear and positive. So it seems that there also T'Pring has failed."

"Oh, I'm so glad! The poor girl - what she must have suffered! Do you think that Spock found her, and is with her now?"

"Very likely, and that would not surprise me, judging by his fierce determination to go and save her," Sarek remarked dryly.

"Then he must really care for her." Amanda looked delighted.

"If you had seen Spock's behaviour this morning you would not doubt it," was Sarek's comment, then he went on, "Tell me, is Captain Kirk with you?"

"Not at the moment. The twins have taken him and Dr McCoy on a trip to the volcano. Why?"

"There are two things I want you to tell Kirk. First, on no account must he initiate a rescue operation in the Ah'Hrak. If I know the Captain he is quite capable of attempting the impossible for Spock, but he would certainly not survive the desert in the present conditions. Tell him that the sandstorm is being constantly monitored, and the moment it subsides we will be notified.

"On the other hand, there is a way Kirk could help. He and Spock share a special mental link, as I recall. Tell him to open his mind and be prepared, for Spock may well try to communicate with him. Everything must be done to contact Spock, you understand."

"Of course, my dear. I shall let him know, but I don't mind telling you that I rather dread his reaction when he hears what happened..." Amanda's voice tailed off meaningfully.

"I can well imagine," was Sarek's dry comment.

* * * * *

Spock came round to the sound of howling winds and the feeling of a hard bed of rock. He raised his head and looked around into the darkness. After a moment he made out the dim, jagged outline of the narrow gap beyond which the gale raged undeterred, which proved that his eyesight was unimpaired, thanks

to the inner eyelids that nature had given him, for anyone other than a Vulcan would have been blinded in that sandstorm. Spock also felt that he could breathe normally again, and taking stock of his refuge he saw that very little sand had seeped into the shallow cave.

Sitting up wearily he felt T'Kahalin's body lying beside him where she must have fallen when he dropped unconscious. With his mind carefully shielded he laid a cautious hand on her face, and was relieved when she stirred, moaning softly, at his touch. But her breathing was shallow, her skin felt abnormally cold, so Spock took off his jacket and wrapped her in it, doing his best to make her comfortable and keep her warm.

No doubt T'Kahalin was in a state of shock and needed medical attention, and for a moment Spock missed McCoy's medical skill. All he had to offer was the water left in his flask and the healing gifts inherited from his Vulcan ancestry. A fit Vulcan could go without water for several days, but Spock was more tired than he cared to admit, and he was concerned about T'Kahalin's condition. There was unfortunately no way of telling how long the sandstorm would continue; the L'Riset had been known to last for up to six days on end. Would they make it? Kaidith! Enough of speculation! There were more urgent matters to deal with.

On that logical conclusion Spock uncapped the flask, took a long draught of water, keeping and savouring it in his parched mouth for a blissful moment. This was to be the first and last time, for T'Kahalin needed the water far more than he. Then leaning over the semi-conscious girl Spock lifted her head and made her drink slowly, carefully; then after putting the precious flask away he took her in his arms and initiated the healing meld.

Although Spock took care not to intrude on her innermost thoughts, he was at once hit by a wave of emotion which told him, better than words, of the terrible experience T'Kahalin had undergone for the last four days. Moved by her suffering and her courage, he slipped into her mind and taking on her pain withdrew the anguish from her mind, replacing it with pleasant thoughts and peaceful images. He mentally wrapped her in the soothing calm of his aura so as to make her feel warm and secure, and when after a moment he felt her body relax and her breathing ease, he knew that she had gone into a healing trance which would eventually blend into a refreshing sleep.

It was now time to disengage from T'Kahalin's mind, but curiously Spock felt some reluctance to do so, and realised to his shame that he would like nothing better than to explore her fascinating mind patterns. But that, of course, was unthinkable, so gently regretfully, he withdrew, keeping only a light link with her so as to monitor her condition and be prepared for any eventuality.

Spock was also much in need of meditation after the strain of the pain-absorbing meld, but first, after a short but intense concentration, he reached out to his father and to his Captain. Both were in a receptive state of mind, for they responded immediately.

Sarek's satisfaction and relief at knowing he was alive were evident, and his calm presence brought comfort to his son. On the other hand Kirk's ebullient manifestation of joy was almost too much to bear, though Spock had by now acquired some experience of his Captain's emotionalism; he found that it could also be stimulating, and their close mind-link must have acted like a tonic, for when it dissolved his tiredness had almost

vanished.

* * * * *

Hours slipped by like the sand swept relentlessly across the desert by the gale. Hours, days and nights came and went, all alike in the roaring darkness. In their shelter T'Kahalin reposed and dreamed, pleasant soothing dreams of cool breezes, deep shade, singing fountains. She dreamed of a warm presence, strong and vigilant, constantly at her side and guarding her from danger. The searing sun, the thirst, the le-matya could no longer harm her; she felt secure.

When at intervals she drifted back to consciousness and the reality of the storm her head was gently lifted, some water was poured, drop by drop, down her throat, but before she reached full awareness light fingers brushed her brow and she sank back into sleep.

* * * * *

Hours went by slowly in the ShiKahr household. All the patience of Vulcan was called for to sustain with decent equanimity the stress of the long waiting. Sarek shared his time between his study and the meditation garden, while Sirvann, Staurak and the rest of the staff took turns to stand guard by the com unit.

* * * * *

Time dragged on endlessly at the Tsai'Kal farm. If the Lady Amanda curbed her anxiety with proper restraint, as befitted the wife of an Ambassador, her companions, Captain Kirk in particular, often demonstrated the regrettable spectacle of Human emotionalism. Despite his mental contact with Spock Kirk could not help worrying, and vented his frustration at their enforced inaction on anyone at hand - who, more often than not, happened to be Dr McCoy.

"Jim!" the latter exclaimed at last in exasperation. "Stop making an exhibition of yourself! Think of your reputation, dammit!"

"Look who's talking. You're worse than I am, Bones!" Kirk retorted.

"At least I behave myself in front of the Vulcans."

"Pah!"

"And for Pete's sake stop pacing about like a caged lion, or I'll give you a shot - and no kidding!"

Kirk rounded on the Doctor. "You wouldn't!" he dared him.

"Want to bet?" McCoy shot back, a challenge in his blue eyes.

* * * * *

Finally, at dawn, the wind faded to a sigh then died. T'Kahalin floated to the surface of consciousness then woke up to an incredible silence, and to a warm touch on the side of her face. She opened her eyes and looked up, straight into dark eyes that regarded her in the dim light.

"Spock?" she whispered. "Is it...?" She saw the austere lines of his face soften almost imperceptibly, and the trace of a smile curve his mouth.

"Yes, it is over, and we are safe."

"Safe..." she repeated softly, savouring the word, the sensation, then she wondered, "How long? I do not remember clearly."

"Three days and four nights, and the sun is about to rise," Spock told her, adding by way of explanation, "You had a long sleep."

"Yes, I had pleasant dreams," murmured T'Kahalin, lost in thought.

Looking around her she was startled to find herself wrapped in Spock's jacket and lying on the sand. Rather self-consciously she sat up slowly, and realised that she felt no more pain, only a great lassitude.

Spock, who was kneeling nearby, sat back on his heels and remarked, "You seem to be recovering."

"Indeed, I feel much better," she replied, and gave him a sidelong glance. "Your doing, I presume. You healed me?"

"No, I did not. I only helped you initiate the healing trance."

Apparently T'Kahalin was not deceived by this half-truth, for she stated simply, "You saved my life, Spock," and her eyes held such a warm glow, her face was so open, so tender, that Spock felt a hot sensation rise in his chest and flow throughout his being.

No. Impossible. I am a Vulcan. How can I experience such exquisite emotions? How can I endure them without being overwhelmed? How do Humans cope with them?

With a considerable effort Spock averted his gaze, got to his feet, and picking up the empty flask said awkwardly, "Er... If you are willing, I suggest we go out and look for water. It may be some time before they find us. Do you think you can walk?"

"I believe so." T'Kahalin stood up with Spock's assistance and found that she could indeed move about. She was also much intrigued by Spock's sudden embarrassment, but she wisely acted as though nothing had happened, and said no more.

They found the narrow entry to be partly obstructed by sand drifts and Spock, pulling a stout knife from his boot, had to hack their way out. Then keeping his thoughts firmly shielded he took the girl's arm and helped her along, through the deep sand, out of the ravine.

With the storm, the terrain had changed completely. Boulders, outcrops had been covered by sand, but the high cliffs were recognisable and Spock looked around in search of landmarks.

"Is there really water in these parts?" T'Kahalin sounded doubtful.

"There should be. I used to know several water holes in these hills, and they cannot all have dried up."

Just as he spoke Eridani, peeking over the horizon, touched the tips of the highest crags with its scarlet beams. "Look!" he exclaimed, pointing up. "Do you see that rock up there? The Elders called it the Xirahnah's Head."

"It does indeed look like the crest and beak of a Xirahnah," T'Kahalin remarked. "How did you know?"

"I often used to hike in the Ah'Hrak in my youth," Spock explained, "and if memory serves, there is a spring at the foot of that crag. Come!"

They were making their way through a chaos of tumbled rocks when suddenly strident cries made them pause and look upward. A pair of Xirahnah, commonly called Silver Birds, had appeared from nowhere and were gliding on the desert thermals, shining like burnished steel in the red sunrise. After a few turns the giant birds, as if sensing they were being watched, flew off in the direction of their namesake crag, circled over it, then with a last eerie call swept away and disappeared from view.

T'Kahalin turned her gaze back to Spock, saying softly, "I have seldom seen more beautiful creatures. Were they showing us the way? Or am I being illogical?"

"I am sure they were, and no, you are not illogical, T'Kahl," Spock replied gravely, and the look he gave her, his unexpected use of the pet name known only to her closest kin, caught her unaware. She gazed at him in wide-eyed surprise and felt something strange, intangible, pass between them.

The next instant the magic was gone, and they resumed their quest.

It was not much of a source. A mere water hole hollowed out of a large, flat boulder by age-long erosion, and fed by a steady trickle of water oozing from an overhanging rock. Because of its configuration the site, enclosed by tall, red cliffs at the base of the Xirahnah's Head, had been spared by the storm, and they could hear the drops of water ring crystal-clear in the pool.

As they approached a number of cinnamon desert squirrels, gathered on the verge, raised watchful heads with bright beady eyes, and the more timid even scurried away. But T'Kahalin sat quietly on the stone and projecting gentle thoughts said in a low voice,

"We also have need of this water. Will you share it with us?"

She and Spock waited, stock still, and a few moments later the small animals returned, accepting the newcomers in their midst.

Only then did T'Kahalin dip her hands in the cool water and run them dripping wet over her face and neck with the grace of a preening bird. then she cupped her hands under the falling drops and drank...

and never had water tasted so good! Feeling revived she looked round and saw Spock standing transfixed, and watching her as if bewitched.

"What are you looking at?" she asked curiously.

"You," he replied simply.

"Oh!" T'Kahalin flushed a delicate green and, very much aware of her tattered clothes and tangled hair, pushed unruly locks away from her face, saying diffidently, "Yes, my appearance is far from presentable, I know."

"True, but you are still beautiful," Spock replied quietly, his dark gaze fixed upon her.

T'Kahalin's blush deepened and she could only stare at him in shocked silence. She had often, when travelling abroad, hear Off-worlders pay her flattering compliments on her looks, or her musical talents, but never had a Vulcan told her point-blank that she was beautiful. Such a thing was not done on Vulcan. Was Spock being illogical? Unthinkable! And yet... how could he find beauty in her when she felt so dirty, so graceless, in rags? It was inconceivable.

Spock, suddenly conscious of his audacity, swallowed hard and said, "My apologies, T'Kahalin. I... I did not mean to give offence. My remark was inexcusable."

"It was, at least, illogical, Commander," she replied primly, amused at seeing him now as embarrassed as she. Then taking pity on his confusion she stood up, straightened her rumpled tunic, and went on, "It was illogical, but not offensive, so you are excused, for if you can see beauty in my bedraggled condition your forbearance is great indeed."

"Forbearance does not come into it," Spock said gravely. "My remark was perhaps illogical, but it was only the truth."

They regarded each other in silence, and T'Kahalin shivered with the strange fire that burned deep in Spock's gaze, while he had the sensation of being drawn, of falling into her golden-green eyes. They felt themselves on the verge of some incredible discovery, and were moved by a strange vibrancy.

But, confused and perhaps unconsciously playing for time, T'Kahalin turned away, saying, "But I am being selfish. I have kept the spring to myself, and you have not had any water." In one smooth motion she bent over the pool, lifted her cupped hands brimming over with clear water, and impulsively offered it to Spock. "Will you not have a drink?" she asked innocently.

Spock, quite conscious of his hammering heart, moved forward, lowered his head and drank from her hands with a pleasure beyond imagining. He drank to the last drop, and almost insensibly let his lips brush her palms and linger there. Then, feeling her tremble ever so slightly, he raised his head, and she snatched her hands away to press them tightly to her heart.

They stood face to face, lost in each other's gaze for what seemed an eternity. In that moment Spock knew at last that he could no longer delude himself with pretences and denials. He knew with blinding clarity how much T'Kahalin meant to him, and as he watched realisation dawn in her eyes and take possession of her being, he saw her sway suddenly as if overcome by her discovery. Instinctively he reached out to her, and the next instant they simply found themselves in each other's arms.

T'Kahalin, shaken and confused, laid her head on Spock's chest, and they stood embraced, stunned by the revelation of a feeling that Vulcans had for so long kept buried so deep as almost to forget its existence.

A few minutes slipped by in silence, then with a sigh T'Kahalin murmured, "What is happening to us, Spock? What have you done to me?"

"I do not know, T'Kahl. Nothing more than what you have done to me." Spock's voice was husky with emotion. "All I know is that from the beginning of our acquaintance I have felt drawn to you, although it took me some time even to admit it. Will you be offended if I tell you that you are most dear to me, more than I could imagine?"

"I... I also find it most pleasing," T'Kahalin confessed in a muffled voice. "I also have thought of you as a kindred spirit, but how could I know that my pleasure in being with you, talking or playing music, was more than a passing interest? I have no experience in emotional involvement. I did not know what it meant?"

"And now, do you know?" asked Spock in a voice deep and tender. "Do you, T'Kahalin? Please, look at me."

T'Kahalin complied, and the moment she met his gaze she knew in her heart of hearts that she loved this man more than she would have thought possible. She gave him a smile, and the answer he was awaiting.

"Yes, now I know, beyond any doubt." She knew also that she ought to be ashamed of such emotional behaviour, but curiously she was not - and nor was Spock, to judge by the true passion she could read in his eyes.



He let a sight of contentment escape him and said quietly, "T'Kahalin, before we pledge ourselves to one another, I must remind you that as Vulcans we should obey the dictates of reason rather than the impulse of our hearts. On the other hand, it would be illogical for us to protest against our natures and deny our mutual attraction, don't you agree?"

"I agree, it would be quite illogical," she said softly, and her glowing eyes told him even more than he wished to know.

"Very well then," Spock said, and holding her close he raised one hand and gently felt for the contact points of the meld. "My mind to your mind," he chanted.

"My thoughts to your thoughts," she whispered.

Their eyes closed, and then together they murmured, "We are one."

At first their minds brushed together tentatively, then the meld sprang to life between them and Spock's mind eased into the patterns of hers for a perfect match. Together they lost themselves in each other's thoughts and feelings; they explored each other in the endless delight of discovery. The knowing, the sharing, the sense of oneness were to them a revelation. Never before had they experienced such feelings of belonging, of completion, nor had they imagined the spiritual fulfilment of a purely mental bond; and the most extraordinary thing was the shared joy of acknowledging at last that special feeling, that emotion called love, which they had confusedly felt stirring within them for so long, and steadfastly denied - until now.

They knew, however, that a meld too deep and too long at first joining could be damaging, and that they had to part, but they lingered, savouring that moment of

accomplishment, and when Spock finally pulled away each was left with a deep sense of loss.

The time had come for the Vulcan rite, so Spock and T'Kahalin each raised a hand, fingers parted, and matched them in the palm-to-palm touch. Then with grave solemnity they spoke the words that pledged them to one another until the Family's agreement and the final bonding ceremony sealed their union.

When it was complete they gazed at each other in silent wonder, and to Spock's utter surprise and delight T'Kahalin laid a hand shyly on his cheek. His Human side could not resist; instinctively he covered her hand with his own, raised it, and pressed her lips to his palm.

This time T'Kahalin did not seem to mind; on the contrary, as he let her go she looked at him inquiringly. "Is this what Humans call a kiss?" she asked with innocent curiosity.

Spock was taken aback. "It is, but how are you so well informed?" he asked, and offered her his paired fingers as a token of affection.

"Because I saw it done when I went to Earth on a concert tour," she replied, touching her fingers to his. "It seemed very strange to me... I wondered what interest Humans find in kissing one another," she admitted after a breathless pause as Spock began the Vulcan touch-play of seduction.

"I suppose they find it pleasant," Spock said dreamily, more intent on what he was doing than on discussing Human behaviour. "When I kissed your hand, did you find it unpleasant?"

"Nooo..." T'Kahalin seemed unsure. "Odd, perhaps, but not unpleasant."

Another pause ensued while the subtle caresses they gave each other's faces claimed all their attention, but T'Kahalin's innate curiosity prompted her to pursue the subject.

"Actually the kiss I observed on Earth was not like yours, Spock. It was, I believe, more... intimate. I saw couples kissing one another on the face, and apparently taking pleasure in the process. Very unusual..."

"Mmmm, I see what you mean," Spock murmured while brushing her lips with his fingertips. "According to my Captain, that is an essential factor in Human courtship procedures."

"Oh? Does Captain Kirk know about such matters?"

"He certainly does. He is even considered an authority on the subject," Spock replied, wondering where she was leading him with all these questions.

"I see. Then perhaps I should ask him to explain..." Her voice tailed off, and she looked up at Spock. "Do you think he would?" she asked, running loving fingers along the firm line of his jaw.

"No doubt, but there is no need to ask him. If you wish to obtain information on the significance of kisses, I know a better way," Spock announced, for, now aware of what she had in mind and amused by her innocent guile, he felt that he was as capable as Jim of satisfying her curiosity.

"Do you, really?" her eyes widened in anticipation. "What is it?"

"Experimentation, T'Kahl. The logical method of learning anything at firsthand is experimentation," Spock told her gravely, and catching her hand he brought it to his lips. "If you would care to experience it with me, I am quite

prepared."

T'Kahalin drew a deep breath and hesitated. Having obtained what she had hoped for, she suddenly had misgivings. "Do you think we should? Kissing may not conform to Vulcan Ethics."

"I think it does," Spock replied, remembering certain occasions when he had inadvertently caught his parents in each other's arms, "and if a kiss on the hand is acceptable, I see no logical reason why a kiss on the face should not be."

"I think you are right," T'Kahalin agreed, her desire to know overcoming her reticence. "We could try... as an experiment?"

"As an experiment, of course," Spock replied deadpan, drawing her to him.

"Have you done it before?" she whispered, and raised an expectant face to him.

"Never, but for everything there is a first time," Spock declared with more assurance than he actually felt.

Then, taking his cue from his Captain's performances - which he had occasionally and unintentionally witnessed - he laid a light kiss on the young woman's cheek; and emboldened by her favourable response he let his mouth glide softly along her jaw to settle finally on her trembling lips.

He felt her stiffen at first, then her mouth softened and she shyly returned his kiss. They drew back and exchanged a glance.

"Interesting," Spock commented. "Even... satisfying. Don't you agree?"

"Very satisfying." T'Kahalin's shining eyes spoke volumes.

"Shall we try again?"

"Why not?" she murmured, and as his arms came around her in a tight embrace she put her arms around his neck, and she had seen the Humans do.

Their second attempt was even more gratifying. In truth, it was little short of perfection. Their total mental harmony had probably stimulated their senses, for the long kiss they exchanged was so sweet and so passionate as to reduce its Human model to insignificance by comparison.

When they parted, albeit reluctantly, T'Kahalin felt so overwhelmed by all these novel sensations that she let her head rest for a moment on Spock's shoulder. As if in a dream she felt his lips touch her forehead and heard his deep, dark voice murmur as if to himself,

"Kisses... Kisses sweeter than wine... Yes, now it makes sense!" Then aware of her curiosity Spock explained, "An old Terran ballad that my mother used to sing when I was a boy. The significance had always escaped me... until now.!"

"Kisses sweeter than wine," she repeated under her breath. "Yes, very appropriate. I must ask the Lady Amanda to teach me that song."

"She will be delighted." Spock smiled down at her, a smile so warm, so tender, that it took her breath away.

They were so absorbed in each other that they paid no attention to the distant drone of skimmers flying over the hilltops. It took the roar of engines directly overhead to bring the two Vulcans back to reality. Looking up, they saw an air-car hovering like a hawk in the sky. It came sweeping down, and as it banked above their heads faces appeared at the windscreen and hands waved at

them

"Here are Captain Kirk and Dr McCoy come to look for us," Spock said, waving back. "We must go now."

The strange tone of regret in his voice was not lost on the young woman. She sighed and looked around at the shimmering pool, at the small desert creatures going about their business as if nothing had happened.

"I shall never forget the spring, Spock," she whispered. "It will be our secret place."

"Yes, the secret place where we found one another." His deep, caring voice brought tears to her eyes, and a longing for the warm protection of his arms, but they had to leave, so she kept her voice under control as she pledged, "I shall come back."

"We shall come back together," answered Spock.

"Together..." she repeated, and the word was both a certainty and a promise to be kept deep in her heart.

The sight that met their eyes when they came out of the rocky defile was startling enough to make them stop in their tracks. No less than three air-cars were parked on the sand, two more were approaching and about to land. Several people were making their way towards the cliffs, one of them marching ahead with a purposeful stride, another hurrying behind, trying to keep pace with him.

Spock and T'Kahalin, one supporting the other, moved slowly forward and Spock instinctively braced himself for the encounter, but in the presence of the Vulcans his Human friends' greeting was properly restrained.

Kirk refrained from hugging his First Officer and merely grasped his shoulder with a concerned look at his thin face, and a question. "Spock, are you all right?"

To which Spock replied quietly, "We are well, Jim."

"Spock! You'll have us believing you really *are* indestructible!" was McCoy's greeting, much on the good Doctor's usual style, but pity and kindness shone in his eyes as he took in T'Kahalin's wasted appearance.

As was so be expected the Vulcans' meeting was right and proper, although Sirvann could hardly hide his emotion at seeing his sister. few words were spoken besides Sarek's quiet greeting to his son, "You did well, Spock," much more was silently expressed in the Vulcan way with looks and the ritual touching of hands.

No time was lost in vain discourse, except that Sarek briefly apprised the pair of the decisions made about them. Sirvann was to take his sister directly to the Healing Centre where T'Lian was expecting her. As for Spock, following their previous plans he was to join his parents and friends at the Tsai'Kal Estate to spend the rest of his well-earned shore leave under the medical supervision of Dr McCoy.

This last detail brought Spock's suspicious gaze to the Doctor, who, true to form, reacted at once.

"Yes, Mr Spock. In case you don't know it. you are in dire need of a full medical, not to mention sleep, rest and plenty of good nutritious food."

"If you don't mind, Doctor, what I need first is a bath and a shave," Spock replied firmly.

"Quite right, Spock, but that does not

prevent you following the Doctor's prescription," Sarek put in.

Then addressing the Security Officers who were standing by and awaiting instructions he said, "Gentlemen, your assistance has been most helpful. Be sure to convey my appreciation to your superior officer. But let me not keep you any longer from your duties."

The men saluted and went off to their respective craft.

Sarek looked at the young woman, and his impassive features softened as he told her kindly, "T'Kahalin, your predicament has been sorely felt by the Family and all of ShiKahr. We are thankful that you survived."

"If I did, Sarek, it is thanks to your son," T'Kahalin said simply.

Sarek raised an eyebrow, inclined his head and replied, "Perhaps, but Spock only did what was expected, considering his responsibility in the matter - an unintentional responsibility, I admit," he amended with a glance at Spock.

A silence followed, full of unspoken thoughts, which Sarek broke decisively. "Come! let us waste no more time here. Sirvann, you take charge of your sister, and you have my leave to stay with her as long as T'Lian deems it necessary. Spock, gentlemen, let us go."

But at the moment of parting Spock hesitated. T'Kahalin, being escorted away by her brother, turned round, and the look they exchanged drew them irresistibly to one another. They touched hands in the farewell ritual, dropped their mental shields, and their thoughts merged again for a brief, intense moment.

Peace and long life, T'Kahalin. Take good care of yourself.

Peace and long life, Spock. Will you come and visit me?

I shall, as soon as the Family Council gives agreement. We must abide by their decision, but I trust that it will be soon.

I shall wait for you. Spock sensed wistfulness in their newly-firmed link, then on a lighter tone, I thank you for the experiment that we made at the spring. It was most... instructive.

My pleasure, T'Kahl. Perhaps, if you are willing, we might repeat it some other time? Spock's gentle teasing rang like chimes in her mind, and she responded in kind.

We might, indeed, if only to try and improve on it?

Both shared with delight the tingle of amusement which ran through their minds, then they retreated behind their barriers and parted, never knowing that they had given the onlookers matter for interesting speculation.

On their way back to their air-car McCoy cocked an eyebrow at Captain Kirk, who grinned back at him, but they wisely refrained from comment until they were safely out of Vulcan earshot.

Meantime Sarek and Spock were boarding the streamlined skimmer that Spock had left in front of T'Pring's house and which had been brought over by Security men. they took their places in silence, Sarek at the controls, and took off, followed by the others, Sirvann heading straight to ShiKahr, Kirk hovering and waiting for Sarek to take the lead.

The Ambassador plotted a course to the Tsai'Kal Valley, set the craft on automatic, then leaning back in his seat steeped his hands and indulged in what had lately become one of his preferred occupations, namely the study of the

fascinating being who was his son.

Spock, deep in thought, was following with his eyes the silver-grey skimmer bearing Sirvann and T'Kahalin away. His lean face, drawn by days of fasting and fatigue, was strangely lit by a look of wonder, or secret contentment such as Sarek had never seen in his son.

That, added to the revealing scene he had just witnessed, seemed significant enough for the austere Vulcan to draw the logical conclusion that something of paramount importance had taken place between Spock and the young woman. And he had a fairly good idea of what that something was - something that he and his wife had been expecting for some time.

And so Sarek, never the man to beat about the bush, decided to bring Spock to declare his intentions. "Spock," he said quietly.

Spock turned his head and found himself caught in the scrutiny of his father's penetrating gaze. "Father?" he asked, hastily bringing his mind back to the present.

Sarek paused, then certain that he had Spock's full attention, asked, "Spock, am I right in assuming that there is an important question concerning your future that you should discuss with me and your mother?"

Spock, rather disconcerted, swallowed and said, "You are, sir. But I proposed to do so in the privacy of your rooms at the farm."

"Very proper, Spock, but this air-car seems private enough for the purpose, since there are only the two of us present. As for Amanda, she may be physically absent, but her presence with us is quite real, as you ought to know."

Spock was moved by Sarek's unwonted reference to the marital bond which permanently joined husband and wife, and replied simply, "I know that, Father."

"Then," Sarek went in imperturbably, "what keeps you from speaking your mind, Spock? If you want T'Kahalin for your wife, why do you not say so?"

"Father!" Curiously, Spock felt at once relieved and somewhat put out. "You knew about it?"

"According to your mother, it was obvious from the first that you and T'Kahalin were meant for each other, and she has some experience in such matters, believe me."

"So... it was that obvious," murmured Spock, a faint blush colouring his cheekbones.

Sarek surveyed his son with a keen look not devoid of amusement. "We did not need special insight to notice your mutual attraction," he said. "Even your Human friends have been aware of your interest for some time."

"I see." Spock paused, considering the implications, then went on, "Do I take it, then, that you and Mother approve of our decision?"

"We not only approve, Spock, we are pleased. T'Kahalin is a personable, talented girl of unimpeachable character. We could not hope for a better choice. However, our agreement is not sufficient. You need that of the Elders, they have the final say. I shall contact T'Pau tonight and inform her, although I rather suspect she already has an inkling of the situation."

"Thank you, Father, but I must admit I am at a loss to understand why you did not exercise your parental authority. If

you knew that T'Kahalin and I were suited to each other, why did you not arrange our bonding as you did with...?" Spock broke off, embarrassed.

"As we did with T'Pring?" Sarek said calmly. "No, my son. The regrettable events resulting from the family's decision to bond you to T'Pring have long since convinced me that it was preferable to let you make your own decision on the matter, and let you have full freedom of choice."

Spock, stupefied, stared at his father. As far as he could remember it was the first time he had even heard Sarek acknowledge an error.

Sarek, a quizzical glint in his dark eyes, returned his gaze and said, "Yes, my son, even Sarek of Vulcan can learn from his mistakes."

CHAPTER 10

Wrapped in the silence of the desert Jim Kirk and Spock were riding side by side over the red sand dunes that unrolled before them with the regularity of gigantic waves frozen into immobility.

That's just plain silly! thought Kirk, whose imagination had conjured up the comparison. *How in Hell could waves freeze in this stifling heat? I ask you!*

For the best part of the day they had been riding along an invisible trail known only to Spock, en route to a mysterious campsite where they were to spend the night. Thank god Eridani's implacable furnace was now on its way to sundown, and the heat would eventually decrease.

Kirk longed for a well-earned rest and a meal by the camp fire under the stars in the company of his Vulcan friend. That sounded romantic enough, but much as

he had enjoyed the trip and admired the stark beauty of the desert, Kirk had by now had about enough of that silent, sandy world devoid of any living soul for kilometres around, but for himself and Spock... and the chacks, supposing that chacks possessed a soul.

All animal life had gone into hiding, leaving only silence over the desert. The only living thing they had seen was a single greyish tree trying to survive by the well where they had stopped for a meal break at noon. It was an apology for a tree, but it gave enough shade for travellers to lie down for a nap, which Kirk had done gratefully. He had been much intrigued by the wind chimes that hung from the low branches, and had asked Spock for an explanation.

"What are they for, Spock? Not just to make it pretty, I suppose? There must be a logical reason; do they signal the presence of the well to travellers?"

"Yes, if necessary, but they first have a ritual purpose," Spock had told him. "They are thanksgiving chimes, to celebrate the presence of water. That is an old tradition in these parts, where water is scarce."

"Well I think that's a very poetic idea, Mr Spock," Kirk had declared.

The thought of that well and its cool water made him feel thirsty, and he reached down for the thermo-flask that hung with his pack across the neck of Lak'Tur, his chack mare. He took a swig of water, rolled it in his mouth, then spat it out with the sand that had a maddening way of seeping everywhere, even into his mouth. So much for desert suits, boots and the rest! They seemed to be no match for that damned sand.

But what was he grouching about? Had Spock not told him that very morning

that the desert never revealed itself for the asking, the desert had to be deserved. Damn right! Kirk felt the tug of that affirmation down to his very bones. Just as well that instead of hiking, as previously planned, they had yielded to McCoy's persuasion and followed Amanda's suggestion of going with the chacks. That way they had travelled in relative comfort, and to ride Morning Star was always a treat.

The Captain had just reached that conclusion when he felt Spock's gaze upon him, and looked at him enquiringly.

"Are you all right, Jim?" Spock asked.

"Fine, Spock," Kirk replied gamely. "A bit sore and stiff, that's all, but that's part of the game, isn't it? You know, I was just thinking that Bones was right. I don't think I'd've made it on foot."

"Agreed, Jim. For once McCoy's talent for contradiction has turned out for the best," Spock admitted.

"You bet it did!" Kirk chuckled.

They were referring to the argument that had sprung up between them and the Doctor when the latter had caught them discussing a three-day trek through the desert.

"You must be crazy, Jim!" McCoy had exploded. "Think of the appalling conditions. Sizzling heat the best part of the day, freezing cold at night, and no water for kilometres around. You'll never make it. Not to mention a few details like the le-matya, the carnivorous plants, the..."

"Doctor, please!" Spock's cool voice had effectively interrupted McCoy's recital. "The conditions are difficult for a Human, I admit, but surely not as bad as your imagination paints them, and you

can rely on me to take good care of the Captain and bring him back to you in perfect shape."

"You, Spock? You, who nearly lost your life in that desert? Are you out of your computerised mind?" The Doctor was off again. "You just came back from that joy-ride in such a state of exhaustion and dehydration that you've barely recovered, and now you mean to do it again, and take Jim along with you? Of all the hare-brained notions!"

"Doctor," Spock had calmly argued, "even you must realise that the circumstances are totally different. We shall go fully equipped for the hike, with enough rations for three days, and sandstorms do not occur every day on the desert, you know."

"How can you be so sure?" McCoy had countered. "If we're to judge from your meteorologists' recent feat, they seem to be as reliable as ours. That last storm which nearly cost you your life - they never saw it coming, did they?"

"Bones," Kirk had protested, "don't you think you're overdoing it?"

But McCoy had been adamant, and the discussion was building up nicely when Amanda walked in and asked what the trouble was. When apprised of the situation she had laughed softly.

"But my dears, why all the fuss? I quite understand your wish to explore the desert with Spock, Jim, but why do it the hard way when there are chacks here at your disposal? I'm surprised you didn't think of that, Spock."

And that had been that.

So now they were trotting over the shifting dunes in the late afternoon of their second day, Kirk on LakTur, his

gentle cinnamon-brown mare, and Spock on Champion, his black stallion.

The sun was steadily sinking towards the horizon and casting the rolling stretch of sand into deep shadow when they topped a steep dune and Spock called a halt.

"Do you see that clump of trees down there?" he asked, pointing.

Kirk peered down and about two kilometres away saw a rocky ridge emerging from the sand, dotted with clusters of bushes and gnarled trees.

"That is our campsite, Captain, and there is a well. I suggest that we move on to arrive before nightfall," Spock said, and kneeling Champion forward he plunged down the slope in a swirl of sand and urged his chack to full gallop, closely followed by his Captain.

Eridani hung low on the west when they reached the foot of the ridge and found the well, complete with tree and wind chimes. They hastily set up camp while there was still daylight. Spock looked after their mounts while Kirk built up the fire and unpacked. The Vulcan, after freeing Champion and LakTur from their trappings, fed and watered them, then set them free to wander and graze on what sparse vegetation they could find. Then having gathered some fruit from the scattered shrubs Spock sat down, drew out his knife and set about chopping them into portions.

"I see you're letting the chacks roam free tonight," Kirk remarked. "No risk of predators here?"

"No, not here, Jim."

"What about the le-matya? Don't they come this far?"

"They do, but this place is... let us say, protected," Spock said cryptically.

"Why?" Kirk looked up in surprise. "Something special about it?"

"Yes, you could say that," Spock admitted, then as Kirk prepared to light the fire he stayed his hand, saying, "No, not yet."

"As you like, Spock, but you sound very mysterious tonight. What's all this about?"

At that very moment the Captain felt a sudden tremor shake the ground around them. "Did you feel that, or am I hallucinating?" he wondered.

"No, Jim, it was quite real," Spock told him calmly.

The next moment the quake started again, strong enough to move the sand and dislodge fragments of stone from the rocky ridge behind them.

"This is getting serious!" Kirk exclaimed half in jest. "I didn't know you have quakes on Vulcan."

"We do not, Jim. On the other hand, we do have a visitor."

Following his gaze in the crimson light of the setting sun Kirk saw the expanse of sand before them suddenly ripple, heave and fall away from an iridescent, glistening body like water from a whale in the ocean. The creature shook the sand off its back, then wiggled towards the two men, revealing the scaly form of a reptile about eight metres long.

"Good god, Spock, what's what?" Kirk whispered in awe.

"A drak, Captain, a sand lizard. We are on its domain," Spock murmured.

The creature, once before them, reared on its hind legs, tilted its huge crested head and a pair of golden eyes surveyed the intruders with more curiosity than hostility.

Kirk sat fascinated by the cold stare, barely conscious of Spock's whisper, "Quiet, Jim. Do not move. Just watch."

The Vulcan then slowly raised both hands and projected his calming aura onto the animal. A few seconds slipped by in complete silence, then with a long-drawn-out hiss the lizard lowered its head to the level of Spock's hands and waited. Spock took some of the fruit he had prepared and offered it on his open hand. A long forked tongue darted out, and in the wink of an eye the fruit was gone. More followed, and was as swiftly consumed.

The Captain was watching his friend with the creature when Spock told him under his breath, "Your turn, Captain."

With some trepidation Kirk fed the drak with the remains of the fruit, after which the lizard, apparently satisfied with the offering, shook its head, hissed, and glided away to vanish in the sand.

"Phew! That was quite an experience, Spock. You knew about it, didn't you? You've seen it before?"

"Yes, Jim, I have had several encounters with draks in this area. They live in underground burrows and only surface to hunt, or to see who intrudes on their territory," Spock explained while lighting the fire.

"I take it then that we've been accepted?"

"Indeed, we have been granted asylum and nothing will dare disturb us, least of all the le-matya, as long as we stay under



the drak's protection."

"It's nice to know they're on our side. It gave me quite a turn when that creature came straight at us. It's not vegetarian, is it?"

"No, the drak is like you, Captain, an omnivore."

"Well it's a good thing it didn't fancy a Starship Captain for supper," was Kirk's comment.

By that time the sudden Vulcan twilight had made its brief appearance, then the full starry sky settled over the desert. The two friends had supper to the tinkling of the wind chimes gently stirring in the breeze. They sat on the margin of light and shadow, their faces and hands cast in strong relief by the dancing flames.

Kirk, coffee mug in hand, stared pensively into the fire and with a contented sigh said at last, "You know, Spock, this is exactly my idea of shore leave: camping out in beautiful surroundings, interesting encounters, and good company. Too bad McCoy isn't with us."

Spock arched an eyebrow. "Can you imagine the good Doctor riding a chack for three days on end?"

"No," Kirk chuckled, "not really. Well, it's been a long day. We'd perhaps better turn in if we must start at daybreak tomorrow,"

When he had settled into his sleeping bag the Captain found that sleep eluded him. Turning his head he saw the Spock was also wide awake and staring up at the starfield overhead. They remained silent for a while, sharing that precious moment together, then Kirk said,

"It's hard to imagine that in less than a week we'll be back up there on the Enterprise."

"It is indeed."

"And it's difficult to believe that by that time my First Officer will be a married man."

"Mmmm."

"I can just visualise the commotion on board when the crew hear the news," Kirk teased.

A long-suffering sigh came from Spock, which brought a smile to the Captain's lips. "You know," he went on, "for a moment I was afraid that you wouldn't come back with us, that you'd settle on Vulcan."

"Why should I do that, Jim?"

"Well I always thought that Vulcan married couples had to live together, and preferably on their home planet."

"Not necessarily. Some couples have to live apart if it is required by their activities, for instance."

"And does T'Kahalin agree with this arrangement?"

"Of course. Her career lies with the Music Academy and with the Philharmonic orchestra, which often takes her throughout the Federation. Mine is with Starfleet, in outer space."

"The Council should have no objection to your marriage, then?"

"Not for that reason, anyway. That question never arose with T'Pring; logically it should not now."

"Logically, right! Then what's taking

them so long to make their minds up and give you the all-clear?" Kirk wondered. "It's been four days now since Sarek notified T'Pol. You won't have much time for your honeymoon, Spock."

"Captain, there is no moon on Vulcan, honey or otherwise."

"Spo-o-o-ock!" groaned Kirk. "Why must you take everything so literally? You know what a honeymoon is, don't you?"

"I do, but that makes no difference, Jim. We have no honeymoons on Vulcan. On the other hand, Vulcan couples marry for life. Separations and divorces, which I believe are commonplace among Humans, are almost unheard of here. So in a way our honeymoons last for life, and beyond."

"I see. Well, Vulcans had better make sure they are temperamentally suited before they marry."

"Precisely, Jim. A full range of bio and psycho tests are required before the Council gives its approval. Every precaution is taken to ensure the success of the bonding."

"Yes, Spock, but that didn't prevent your bonding with T'Pol from being a hopeless failure."

"I know, Jim, but even the best arrangements are not always proof against unforeseen events."

"Agreed," Kirk grunted, and a long pause ensued while each followed his own line of thought.

Spock assumed that his companion had fallen asleep when Kirk, probably feeling that the time was right for confidences, asked him point-blank, "Tell me, Spock, what's it like to be in love?"

Silence - a silence so tight that Kirk began to wonder if he had not perhaps shocked his friend to the depths of his Vulcan soul.

"Why ask me, Jim? You are far more qualified than I to answer that question," Spock said at last.

"Touche, Mr Spock. I asked for that, didn't I? Sorry, my friend - I didn't mean to pry. Don't answer if you'd rather not."

"Jim..." Spock began, then paused as if to marshal his thoughts. "Jim, it is not that I don't want to, but that I find it difficult to express myself on that subject. All this is so new to me that I have been unable yet to analyse what I feel, and to estimate the degree of..."

"Spock, please!" Kirk broke in with a laugh. "I'm not asking for a scientific report on your emotions. All I want to know is if you are happy."

"Ah... I believe that I am, although I cannot yet fully appreciate that sensation of well-being that I suppose you would call happiness, Jim."

"You *are* happy, Spock, I can tell, even if you're not sure," Kirk said warmly, "and well you might be, having won the most beautiful and charming woman of ShiKahr. Isn't she marvellous?"

"Mmmm... she is indeed." Spock's dreamy voice seemed to come from afar. "She is a remarkable woman, and I still cannot comprehend why she has accepted me, such as I am."

"What do you mean, 'such as you are', Spock?" Kirk demanded. "That perhaps you are unworthy of T'Pol? If that's what you think, you need to have your head examined, my friend!"

"But Jim, consider! I am only a half-

Vulcan, a mere Science Officer in Starfleet, while she is acknowledged as this century's most important musician, the greatest composer of our Music Academy. Her beauty and her intellect are unmatched, she moves in the best circles of the Federation, yet she is willing to share her life, her mind, her very soul with me. That will never cease to fill me with wonder, Jim."

Kirk, too, was full of wonder at hearing his Vulcan friend, that unique being set apart by his dual ancestry, speak of his bride-to-be with such humble admiration. His proud Vulcan had been conquered by the enchanting T'Kahalin, that much was obvious, but as he was well aware, the reverse was equally true.

"Spock," he said softly, "hasn't it occurred to you that T'Kahalin feels for you as you feel for her? If she is ready to marry you it's because she truly cares for you. It's as simple as that. Dammit, Spock, don't you realise that you two are simply in love with each other? Yes, my friend, it's love - pure, unadulterated love - whatever your Vulcan logic may say to the contrary."

A long silence followed, enhanced by the wind chimes, then Spock said quietly, "I think that my Vulcan logic is prepared to admit that you may be right, Jim."

"Of course I am," Kirk mumbled through a yawn. "Trust my life-long experience. Actually it all comes down to what a wise man said aeons ago. 'It's love that makes the world go round.' There you have it in a nutshell, Spock." he yawned again, loudly.

"Indeed?" After some thought Spock declared, "Whoever came up with that theory knew nothing of the Laws of Physics, Captain."

A sleepy chuckle answered him.

"That, Mr Science Officer, was only a... figure of speech... as you..." Kirk's voice tailed off into silence.

"Captain? Jim?" No reply; his Captain had finally dropped off to sleep.

The Vulcan allowed himself a tiny smile, certain that no-one but the stars could see it, then slipping into a light meditation he let his thoughts dwell for a moment on happiness, oneness, love; strange and new concepts which revolved around the fascinating young woman whose awareness was ever-present in his mind. He was thus pleasantly absorbed when sleep claimed him.

* * * * *

By the end of the following day Captain Kirk was flying Spock's air-car back to ShiKahr with his Vulcan friend sitting, lost in thought, beside him. When they had returned to the Tsai'Kal Farm at midday, tired, happy and ravenous, they had been told that Spock's parents had gone to ShiKahr with Dr McCoy early that morning. Sarek had left a short message requesting Spock to go back home as soon as was convenient.

So, after a shower and a light lunch with the Tsai'Kal family the two had taken their leave, with the promise to return for a longer stay on their next trip to Vulcan.

Jim Kirk stole a sidelong glance at his companion. "A penny for your thoughts?" he said lightly.

"Jim?" Spock surfaced with a start.

"Preoccupied, Spock?"

"No... I am just wondering what caused my father's sudden change of plan, Jim."

"News from the Council of Elders, no doubt, what else?" Kirk suggested. "I'll bet that rushed your mother into the preparations for your bonding ceremony. You know what mothers are like when it comes to the weddings of their children, especially their only sons."

"Possibly, but I still do not understand why Sarek gave no explanation in his message."

"Perhaps to surprise you?" the Captain said jokingly, but in view of Spock's primly-raised eyebrow he amended, with a grin, "No, of course not! Sarek wouldn't do that. Anyway, it won't be long now."

"No." Spock glanced down at the desert unrolling under the craft. "Another twenty minutes, and we shall arrive."

He could not help but feel a certain uneasiness when they reached the outskirts of ShiKahr and Kirk deftly steered the skimmer over the rooftops before landing in the courtyard of Sarek's mansion.

The air-car had barely touched down when the door opened and Staurak appeared at the top of the steps.

"Welcome home, gentlemen," he said solemnly, and signed to an underling to go and collect their bags.

"Greetings, Staurak," they chorused, climbing the steps.

"Are my parents at home?" Spock asked.

"They are, as well as Dr McCoy. Your father is expecting you in his study." The old Vulcan's face and tone of voice were studiously formal and expressionless.

As they walked into the hall Amanda

came to greet them. "Ah, here are our travellers!" Her pleasant smile looked somewhat forced. "Did you have a good trip, my dears? And what do you think of our desert, Captain?"

"Hot, dry and spectacular, Amanda. It was well worth it, and we had a great time," Kirk replied.

"Good. I'm glad you had fun," she said absent-mindedly, her eyes on her son. "Spock, your father wants to see you now. Will you please excuse us, Jim?"

"Sure. I must go and change, and unpack. See you later."

As Kirk made for the stairs he heard Spock say, "Mother, is something the matter?", to which she replied in a low voice, "Sarek will tell you, Spock. Come in," and the door of the study closed behind them.

Hmmm, wonder what's up? Kirk thought, starting up the stairs. He found McCoy waiting for him on the landing. "Hi, Bones! Here we are, safe and sound in spite of your horrific predictions."

"Mmmm..." The Doctor looked him over critically. "You've lost weight, and you've gained a tan, which isn't surprising. Well, you look all right, but you can consider yourself lucky," he said dryly.

"I *am* perfectly all right, and I had a wonderful time," Kirk enthused as he pushed open the door of his room. "You don't know what you missed, Bones. Spock knows the desert like the back of his hand, and he took me to some places... You have no idea!"

"I can well imagine!" McCoy snorted as he followed his friend into the room. "Better you than me, Jim. Camping out in the desert isn't exactly my cup of tea."

Closing the door, he leaned against it, arms folded on his chest, and watched the Captain bustle about, chatting happily.

"By the way," Kirk was saying, "why didn't you wait for us at the farm? We were supposed to come back together. Why the hurry? Has the wedding been brought forward?"

He was hanging his clothes in the wardrobe when the devastating answer came.

"There will be no wedding, Jim."

"What?" Kirk whirled round. "What did you say?"

"You heard me." McCoy's face was grim. "Spock's bonding ceremony has been cancelled."

Kirk stood stock still while the impact of the words sank in, then a deep flush rushed up his face. "No!" he flared up. "No! They can't do that! My god, they can't do that to Spock! Why, only yesterday..."

He fell silent, aware of a pang of dismay as he remembered Spock opening his heart so trustingly to him. "T'Pau and the Elders refused, didn't they?" he resumed. "But don't they realise those two are in love? No, of course not! What do those old fossils know about love?"

"Jim, listen!" McCoy tried to put in a word, but as well try to stem an overflowing torrent.

"But what is Sarek doing? And Amanda?" Kirk demanded. "Don't they have anything to say in the matter? Are they going to stand by and let their son yield to the decree of a bunch of...?"

"Jim! Stop it, will you!" At last McCoy's sharp interruption silenced the

Captain. "Jim, I know what you're feeling. Believe me, everyone here is very upset about it, but let me explain. Sit down and listen to me."

Kirk eyed the Doctor warily, then sank down on the edge of his bed. "Okay, Bones, I'm listening. Explain what? The Council's objections?"

"Exactly, and they are perfectly justified." McCoy sat down beside him. "Jim, Spock and T'Kahalin are unsuitable for each other."

"Unsuitable?" Kirk repeated in disbelief. "That's ridiculous! I've never seen a couple more perfectly matched. Anyone in his right mind could see that."

"They are... and they are not, Jim," was McCoy's cryptic reply.

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"It depends on the tests. Take the psycho test, for instance. Positive all through. Actually the comparison of Spock's and T'Kahalin's psychological profiles indicates a compatibility ratio of 82%, a ratio so exceptional that it's never been recorded before. In plain words, Jim, they have a completely compatible mental pattern. The Science Academy can't get over it."

"You see, Bones? That's what I keep telling you. No need for all this psycho clap-trap; we knew that all along."

"I know, Jim, but you don't know the half of it. If it was only a matter of mental affinity, no problem, the Council would give its blessing right away; but unfortunately..." the Doctor heaved a sigh and shifted uneasily, "unfortunately there are all the other tests to take into account - physiology, biology, what have you. These Vulcans are amazing thorough and painstaking."

"Yeah, I know," Kirk put in. "Spock mentioned those tests to me."

"Well, extensive tests have been conducted by T'Lian and her team on Spock's and T'Kahalin's physiological data, which was stored with that of the entire Vulcan population in the Medical Academy data banks."

"And the results? Come on, Bones!"

"The results are catastrophic, Jim. They are biologically incompatible."

"Oh no!" Kirk groaned. "Then if I've got it right, if they marry..."

"If they marry, T'Kahalin will die. All the tests indicate that even if she survived pregnancy she would die in childbirth. It's Spock's crazy physiology, Jim. Total incompatibility with the girl's."

"But look at Sarek and Amanda, Bones. Vulcan and Human... and it worked."

"Sure it did, otherwise Spock wouldn't be here. It seems that in their case Sarek's rare blood group - one or two percent of all Vulcans, remember - was a deciding factor. T'Kahalin's blood group, unfortunately, is totally incompatible with T-negative."

"Hmmm," Kirk muttered, considering the implications. "Is there really no way? I mean, with all the possibilities that genetic science can offer nowadays..."

"No, Jim, there really is nothing they can do, and it's not for want of trying. T'Lian was so upset by the result, and so concerned about her niece, that she enlisted her geneticist colleagues to check her work. For the last two days hundreds of tests and verifications have been done in the labs of the Science Academy. She even called in Professor Stolar and his

team. They were very willing to help, considering what Spock did for them two years ago. They all came to the same stark conclusion: incompatibility.

"This was duly reported to T'Pau, Sarek and the Family Council who, because of the gravity of the problem, referred the question to the High Council of Vulcan, no less, for a final decision. After all, Spock and T'Kahalin are not exactly nonentities in Vulcan society. And as a last resort T'Lian called Sarek last night at the farm, asking for, I quote, 'Dr McCoy's expertise as Spock's personal physician'. Very flattering, but what more could I do than Vulcan's genetic experts? Anyway we left early this morning for the Academy, and we all gathered in Stolar's lab for a last check.

"There's no way, Jim. Even crack scientists must yield to the laws of nature and admit defeat. And I tell you, all those Vulcans were truly sorry. When they told Sarek and Amanda I saw how deeply they felt. Sarek, like a true Vulcan, took it on the chin, but Amanda..." McCoy shook his head. "Poor Amanda - to say that she was distressed is putting it mildly."

"No wonder," Kirk sighed. "To see all her hopes shattered to pieces... What a shock for her, for them all. And Spock? How is he going to take it? This is sure to shut him up again in his Vulcan shell. Damn! It's so unfair, Bones. He was just beginning to learn what happiness, what love, really are. It was just like a dream come true. He'd found the ideal life-partner at last, and no more T'Pring around to create trouble and mischief." He paused, caught by an idea. "I wonder what happened in that storm in the desert. Has anything come out of the searches?"

"As a matter of fact, it has," the Doctor told him as he stood up and moved to the window. "When you were both away,

Sarek received a message from the Security Section. They found the wreckage of her air-car partly buried in the sand, and they also identified some scraps of her clothes, but that's all. Her remains, whatever was left of her after the explosion, are lost forever in the desert."

"Where she had meant to leave Spock and T'Kahalin in the first place," Kirk said thoughtfully, staring out at the sunset. "You know, Bones, I can't bring myself to be sorry for the girl. She was wickedness personified. In my view she only got her just deserts. The good thing is she's not here to gloat over Spock's misfortune."

"That's not what I'd call much of a eulogy, Jim, but I take your point. T'Pring was hoist with her own petard," McCoy commented, joining Kirk at the window.

"Yeah," Kirk nodded, "she's gone, all right, but she's somehow been granted what you might call a posthumous satisfaction: Spock will never have T'Kahalin."

"Damn shame!" McCoy grunted, then remarked, "Ah, there's Spock. Wonder where he's going?"

They watched the tall figure striding rapidly across the garden, heedless of the branches and prickles that he brushed on the way.

"To the desert, probably," Kirk replied quietly. "That's his refuge when he's hurt and needs to be alone. Always has been since he was a child, Amanda told me. God, I wish there was something I could do!"

"There is, Jim," the Doctor told him. "There's your friendship - you know how much he relies on it."

"Yes, but... Poor Spock! It's a poor

substitute for the true love he'd just begun to accept. And T'Kahalin? I'm sure it's just as bad for her. Has she been told yet?"

"By now, yes, certainly. T'Pau and T'Lian were going to see her after receiving confirmation of the High Council's final decision. They must be with her now, I suppose."

* * * * *

"The Family cannot allow your life to be jeopardised, T'Kahalin, and as T'Lian just explained to you, it would be if you mated with Spock."

T'Pau's voice was the only sound in the room. T'Lian and Sirvann watched the forlorn figure of T'Kahalin with concern. She sat, head bowed over her clenched hands, and had difficulty remaining calm in front of T'Pau.

After a moment she drew in a shaky breath. "My life?" she whispered. "You talk of my life? But what is my life worth without him?"

"Do not speak like this, child," T'Pau said sharply. "Keep in mind Surak's teachings. All life is sacred to Vulcans and must be preserved, yours included. It is therefore your responsibility, your duty to Vulcan, to protect your life and not risk it by bonding with an unsuitable male, even for emotional considerations."

T'Kahalin paled, but collecting herself tightly replied with dignity, "I know my duty, T'Pau, I know my responsibility to Vulcan, but... you do not know what you ask of me. Spock is the mate I have always wished for. I have never been spiritually attuned to anyone as I am to him and... and you want me to renounce him?" he voice faltered, and despair clutched at her heart.

"It is a great loss, I know, T'Kahalin." T'Pau's voice softened perceptibly, "but you must not let your feelings overcome your mind. You must be strong, my child, and logically accept the fact that your bonding with Spock is impossible."

"T'Kahl," T'Lian said softly, "you do understand, don't you? Exceptional though your mental affinity with Spock may be, as proven by our tests, your joining with him would put your life at risk. We cannot allow that. This is a reality you have to accept, painful though it is."

"I understand, and I beg forgiveness," T'Kahalin said in a toneless voice. "I shall accept the decision of the Council in so far as Spock accepts it too. What does he say? Does he know about it?"

T'Pau and T'Lian exchanged a glance. "Sarek was to call him back from the Tsai'Kal farm," T'Lian said. "I assume that Spock must know by now."

Just as she spoke T'Kahalin stiffened and closed her eyes, her face suddenly drained of colour. She pressed her hands to her temples and gasped,

"He knows!... Oh, he knows now... Oh, so much pain... distress... anger... No, Spock! Not your fault... No-one's fault... Regrets, yes... Grief... so much grief... Oh Spock, my own, do we have to accept their decision? Do we have to...?"

T'Kahalin's disjointed utterances were all too clear to the startled listeners.

"What does this mean?" T'Pau asked severely. "T'Lian, are they bonded?"

"No, not that I am aware. It is most unusual. T'Kahl? T'Kahalin? Answer me!" T'Lian called, but her niece was so deep in her trance that she paid no attention.

"Shall I, T'Pau?" T'Lian asked the Matriarch.

"Yes, do it. You are a Healer, you have the skill. This mental contact must be stopped."

Sirvann, a silent observer until now, stood up and protested, "No! You cannot do that. This may harm her mind beyond repair. Please, leave her alone."

"Rest easy, Sirvann, I know what I am doing," T'Lian told him quietly. "A light mind meld should suffice. Do you not trust me?"

"I do, T'Lian. I apologise. But my sister has gone through so much already... If she could be spared..."

"I know. I shall take care. Be quiet now."

It took Healer T'Lian only a few minutes to bring T'Kahalin back to full consciousness. As she sat pale and shaken her aunt said kindly, "T'Kahalin, answer me, please. Are you bonded with Spock?"

"No!" She looked shocked. "No, of course not. It would be improper before the official ceremony."

"Exactly, but why do I feel Spock's presence in your mind? A presence strong enough to lock you in a trance?"

"I cannot say. All I know is that we mind-melded once, for a short time, in the desert. I have felt him close to me ever since, like a presence hovering at the edge of my mind, nothing more... until now."

T'Lian nodded, looking grave. "I see. Yes, I see what happened T'Pau. Their spiritual empathy is so strong that the simple merging of their thoughts has linked them almost as solidly as a full bonding. They have not really been

conscious of being so linked until that moment when emotions which neither could control brought their minds together. A most unusual occurrence, I admit."

"But what can be done? Since they will never mate, they cannot keep their minds permanently bonded," T'Pau declared peremptorily.

"I agree." T'Lian paused for thought, then went on, "Mind links can be dissolved, of course, but the process is painful and liable to damaging after-effects. I would not recommend it. The safer and more effective way, in my opinion, is to erase the memories of their feelings for each other. Oblivion would give them the peace of mind which they might not fully achieve otherwise. It is for you to decide, T'Pau."

"Indeed, this is by far the best solution," T'Pau decided. "T'Kahalin, my child, do you...?"

"No! I refuse! You cannot take that from me. For everything else, I submit to your decision, T'Pau. You take Spock away from me, you condemn me to live... I accept. But I beg of you, let me have my memories. That is all I have left now." T'Kahalin was now on her feet, quivering with indignation, beautiful in her revolt.

T'Pau's dark eyes gazed at her for a moment. "Memories can be painful, T'Kahalin," she said at length. "It is preferable sometimes to forget distressing events, a feat that other species can accomplish easily, but which is denied to Vulcans without assistance. Is that what you want, child? Are you prepared to live with regrets for the rest of your life?"

"I am prepared to live the rest of my life remembering with joy and gratitude the few moments of fulfilment that I shared with Spock. That is all I have left;

that is all I ask for," T'Kahalin replied simply, her golden-green eyes shining with unshed tears.

T'Pau nodded acceptance. "Your opinion, T'Lian?" she asked.

"Since it is T'Kahalin's choice, I think that the least we can do is to let her have that satisfaction. As for her bond with Spock, I incline to believe that it will fade away with time and distance, and eventually disappear altogether."

"Very well. Sirvann, as T'Kahalin's brother you may have your say."

"I agree with T'Lian, T'Pau. Please, let my sister keep her memories."

"Good. One more point, T'Kahalin," the Matriarch then said. "What if Spock chooses oblivion? What if he prefers to forget you and what you mean to him?" The dark, beady eyes challenged T'Kahalin's, and read in them an unshakable conviction as the girl replied firmly,

"He will not, T'Pau. of that I am certain."

"You seem to have a great deal of faith in Spock, child."

"I do, because I know him. I know his mind, T'Pau."

The old lady looked at her searchingly, then solemnly declared, "So be it, then. Keep your precious memories, T'Kahalin. In time, you will learn to treasure them even more. I grieve with thee and with Spock, my child." She stood up and retrieved her cane, adding, "I must go and see him now. Sirvann will take me to Sarek's house."

A thought crossed her mind, and she paused at the door. "I am told that Spock

is going back to Starfleet in a few days. If he wishes to take his leave of you, T'Kahalin, will you receive him?"

"I shall be honoured, T'Pau." That was all the girl could muster, for as soon as the door closed behind T'Pau and her brother she sank onto the couch and buried her face in her hands.

* * * * *

Jim Kirk was leaning against the garden gate and staring out into the dark, waiting. The breeze, filled with the scents of the desert, ruffled his hair and cooled his brow. It had been almost two hours since Spock had gone, like a hurt animal hiding away to lick his wounds.

After supper, served routinely, although no-one felt like eating, they had adjourned to Amanda's sitting room while Sarek found some pretext to retire to his study. Amanda had hinted that he was more distressed than he would like to admit, having set great hopes on the match and on the prospect of offspring to ensure the continuation of their Family line. But alas, it was not to be, and Amanda had confessed with tears in her eyes that she despaired of ever seeing her son happily married.

When Sarek had eventually emerged and announced T'Pau's visit, the Captain had gone out to the edge of the desert to meet his friend.

The desert was unsafe at night, and Kirk hesitated to venture too far out into the dunes he could see shimmering in the starlight. It was easy to get lost out there. He tried to communicate his presence down their mental link, but Spock remained obstinately silent, locked behind his shields.

Kirk waited, and was lost in the contemplation of the myriad fiery sparks

which spangled the blackness of the sky when the faint sound of a sandslide brought his attention back to the ground. Peering into the darkness he saw a shadow move among the other shadows, then the dark figure of Spock stood out against the background of the dunes.

Kirk took a few steps forward. "Spock!" he called.

The shadow halted. "Jim?" There was a hint of surprise in the voice.

"Yes, it's me." The Captain walked on, and stopping by his friend he asked with concern, "Are you all right, Spock?"

"Perfectly, Captain," said the cold voice.

Undeterred, Kirk went on, "I know what you're feeling, Spock, and I also know from experience that all one asks for in these circumstances is to be left alone. But I just want you to know that when eventually you do look for a friendly shoulder to cry on, I'm here, for what it's worth."

"Thank you for the offer, Captain, but that would be most improper."

"Dammit, Spock, don't pretend you don't understand. I only mean that when you need a friend, you know where to look. Okay?"

"Understood, Jim. Thank you," was all the answer he received.

After a moment of silence Spock started to walk to the house, and Kirk fell into step with him. From what he could see of his face Spock looked so tightly controlled that Kirk easily identified the cold front behind which the Vulcan withdrew when he was most deeply hurt.

"You sure you're all right, Spock?" he

asked again, tentatively.

"If I am not, I shall be eventually," Spock replied at last.

"Oh?"

"For the moment I have to come to terms with the consequences of my errors, and it is not a pleasant occupation."

"Errors?" Kirk interjected. "What errors?"

"Errors that a Vulcan should never make, Jim."

"You don't call falling in love an error, do you?"

"Yes, I do. First, I allowed myself to be ruled by my emotions. Then I believed for a moment that happiness was made for me. Error, Jim. I should have known better."

Such bitterness made the Captain wince. "Good god, Spock!" he exclaimed, "How could you, how could anyone know how those bio-tests would turn out?"

"Precisely, Captain. That is my greatest error. One must not become involved in emotional attachment without measuring the possible consequences. Because I failed to do so, I am responsible for T'Kahalin's distress." He nearly choked on the word.

"And what about your distress, Spock?" Kirk asked gently.

"And mine too," Spock admitted in a hollow voice.

"Spock, be logical. It's no-one's fault, it's only one of those damned unfortunate circumstances..." Kirk fell silent, at a loss

for an argument to convince his friend, then trying another tack he said, "Look, Spock, you always tell me that regrets are pointless. Then why torment yourself over a responsibility which is not yours? Where is your Vulcan logic?"

Spock halted, looked up at the starry sky, and sighed. "It seems that my logic has failed me lately, Jim. I need a certain time to readjust to the present situation." Then he walked on again, saying, "Come. T'Pau has arrived. We must not keep her waiting."

* * * * *

T'Kahalin was absent-mindedly plucking the strings of her harp, calling forth the melody line that she had been working on - ages ago, it seemed.

After two days spent in prostration and meditation under Sirvann's brotherly care she found that her music was the best cure for her grief. She was a Vulcan, and she owed it to herself and Spock to observe proper Vulcan behaviour.

Spock had never left her thoughts. He was the inspiration for the musical piece that she had in mind, a symphony with harps and orchestra. The theme was that of Spock, so it was only right that the composition be the symbolic convergence of what they meant to each other, a tribute to their all-too-brief encounter, and to their memories.

The young woman laid her instrument aside and rose to her feet. She was expecting Spock any time now, and was feeling strangely nervous. The idea of seeing him again was enough to shake what control she had painfully achieved. She went to the garden door and stared out blindly, trying to compose herself.

Then suddenly she knew he was there, behind her, watching her, and she

slowly turned round as if drawn by his magnetic gaze. Spock had entered on silent feet and was standing just inside the door which Sirvann had discreetly closed behind him.

Silence reigned as they gazed appraisingly at each other across the room. To Spock, T'Kahalin looked more endearing than ever, radiating grace and intelligence, dressed with the same quiet elegance as when he had seen her for the first time.

He appeared to her remotely austere, a dark handsome man aloofly impressive in that black cloak casually thrown over his shoulders.

He took a step forward, and raising his hand said with stiff formality, "Greetings, T'Kahalin. You honour me by granting me this last meeting."

"I am honoured by your visit, Spock," she replied in kind, inwardly dismayed by this formal mode of address. After an awkward pause she bravely went on, "You leave tomorrow, I was told."

"Yes, I have come to bid you farewell, and to convey the best regards of Captain Kirk and Dr McCoy."

"Most kind," she murmured; then clasping her hands tightly together she said in what she hoped was an easy tone, "You will be gone a long time, I suppose?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Will you...?" She faltered, then tried again. "Will you return to Vulcan some time in your travels?"

"I do not know yet."

They paused and stared at each other in shocked realisation, suddenly

conscious of having re-enacted almost word for word their parting scene in the botanic garden two years past, a scene printed ever since in their memories.

Spock then cleared his throat, took another step forward, and the moment he spoke her name that frigid armour in which he had wrapped himself fell away, revealing the warm, loving man T'Kahalin had discovered by the spring in the Ah'Hrak Desert.

A moment later they were in each other's arms, having no recollection of crossing the space between them. Once again they became one; they merged thoughts and feelings with a joy mixed with grief all the more intense because it was the last time.

When at last they parted they knew that they still had, intact and doubly precious, their joined memories and the mental bond which linked them like a tenuous golden thread.

T'Kahalin took Spock's hand and led him to the couch where they sat in silence, gazing at each other, each filling eyes and memory with the vision of the other. Few words were exchanged. All that mattered, their love, their regrets, their acceptance, was expressed with their gazes and kept in the secret of their hearts.

When, later, Sirvann came in bringing refreshments and sat with them at their invitation, the conversation ran on such safe topics as Spock's future missions and T'Kahalin's music and concerts. Any more intimate subject would have been a breach of Vulcan propriety.

All too soon, however, Spock had to go, and Sirvann used a pretext to withdraw with commendable discretion.

"Your brother is very understanding,"

Spock remarked, fastening the clasp of his cloak.

"He is very dear to me, and he feels deeply for us," she said. "He also admires you greatly."

"Does he?" An eyebrow lifted. "I believe that is regarded as an improper thing to do," Spock said with mock severity.

"Is it?" T'Kahalin was all innocence. "Then I must ask forgiveness, because I too admire you greatly."

Spock could not resist. He swept her into his arms and whispered in her ear, "You are forgiven, beloved, and I must confess to admiring you more than is acceptable in Vulcan society. I must go now, T'Kahl, but before I do, may I have your permission to kiss you for the last time?"

In answer she put her arms around his neck with a delightful lack of restraint and told him in a low voice, "You have it, Spock, with all my heart."

"Then let us try to improve on our last experience," he said before suiting his action to his word.

Time stood still, then...

"Kisses sweeter than wine," T'Kahalin murmured when she had recovered her breath; then looking up at Spock, her eyes brimming with tears, she vowed, "I shall go back to the source, Spock. I shall go back to our secret place."

"Yes, and I shall be with you. Wherever I happen to be in the galaxy, I shall be with you," he promised. "Remember: parted and never parted... a Vulcan heart..."

"Once given..." she went on.

"... is given for all time," Spock finished the binding formula.

Then as they touched hands, palm to palm, they spoke the farewell ritual, "Let peace be with you at all times, dearest. Live long and prosper," in voices husky with emotion.

Spock then dropped a light kiss on her lips and, tearing himself away from her, turned in a swirl of black cloak... and was gone.

EPILOGUE

Six months later...

"Sulu! Hold, please! Wait for me!"

Sulu, Chief Helmsman of the Enterprise, obliged, and two seconds later the Communications Officer rushed into the turbo-lift gasping a "Thank you!" before leaning breathlessly against the wall.

"Such a hurry, Uhura! Where to?" Sulu asked with a grin.

"I don't know. I'm looking for Spock. Know where he is?"

"Lucky man. Sure it's Spock you're looking for? Your charms would be wasted on that Vulcan, you know."

"Don't be a fool! I want to see Spock about music, not what you think."

"Oh, in that case, I happen to know where he is. In the Officers' Lounge, playing chess with the Captain," Sulu revealed at last.

"Couldn't you have said so in the first place? Deck 8," Uhura called, and the

turbo-lift hummed to life.

"And when I saw them last," Sulu went on, "it looked like the Captain was well on the way to winning."

"Spock? Beaten at chess? Things are coming to a pretty pass," Uhura commented as she slipped out of the opening doors. "Thanks for the lift!" she called back with a wave to Sulu.

When she entered the lounge, crowded now with off-watch officers, Uhura saw that Sulu had been right. As she reached the quiet corner where Kirk and Spock were seated, a 3-D chess set between them, Kirk was delicately picking up one of the pieces and saying with obvious glee, "Checkmate, Mr Spock!"

The Vulcan frowned slightly over the board, then declared, "That was a most unconventional move, Captain."

"I know, Spock, but that's the beauty of it. You didn't see it coming, did you, my friend?"

"No, I admit to a certain lack of attention tonight."

"Understandable, Mr Spock," Kirk said quietly, with a keen glance at his face. "Want to take your revenge?"

"Not tonight, if you don't mind, Captain."

"Okay, some other time, then," Kirk said airily, then catching sight of Uhura, who was obviously waiting, he said, "Hullo, Uhura, what can I do for you?"

"Not you, Captain, it's Mr Spock I just want to see for a minute."

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Mr Spock, I've got something here for you which I found yesterday at that music store at the Base. They told me it's just been released, and it's a hit already. It's a marvellous piece of Vulcan music with harps and orchestra. You must hear it - it's out of this world. So I got this tape for you. Yes, take it, Mr Spock, it is for you; I've got another one," she said, offering the tape to the Vulcan.

"You'll see," Uhura went on, "that it's by a composer named... er... T'Kahalin; a woman, I guess, with that name. Do you know of her?"

Kirk started and shot a glance at his First Officer, who sat in silent shock. "Yes, of course!" he exclaimed, giving his friend time to recover his control. "We know of her, and even attended one of her concerts when we were on leave on Vulcan. Do you know she is considered one of their leading musicians at the moment?"

"Oh, really? That's wonderful!" Uhura beamed. "There's just one thing, though. The title is in ancient Vulcanur, something about memory, I figured out. Could you translate it for me, Mr Spock?"

Spock looked down at the tape which he held clutched in his hand, then turned it over, and curiously seemed to have some trouble in reading the title. At last he swallowed hard and said, "You are right, Lieutenant. It is in the poetic form of Vulcanur, seldom used nowadays. I believe that the most accurate translation would be... 'Unchained Memories'. Yes, it is 'Unchained Memories'," he repeated under his breath.

"'Unchained Memories'?" Uhura said slowly, head tilted like a bird's. "Rather unusual, but quite fitting to the music. I like it - don't you, Mr Spock?"

"I shall have to listen to the tape

before I can give you an opinion. Now, if you will excuse me..." Spock stood up abruptly, and turning on his heel left the room without a backward glance.

Uhura followed him with her eyes, stiff with outrage. "Well!" she said peevishly, "For all the thanks I got I might as well have spared myself the trouble. What's bitten him? Did I do something wrong, or what, Captain?"

"Uhura," Kirk said quietly, "don't be too hard on Spock. You did nothing wrong, but..." He bit his lip, hesitated, then making his decision told her, "Sit down, Lieutenant. I think you deserve an explanation, if only to justify Spock and keep him in your good books. I know I can rely on your discretion," he added with a knowing smile.

"Sure, Captain," she said, taking a seat. "At my station, you know, you learn how to keep quiet."

"I know, and I appreciate that. So what I'm going to tell you must stay strictly between us. Only Dr McCoy knows about it because, you see, when we were last on Vulcan..."

* * * * *

A few hours later when Captain Kirk, after a routine check in Engineering and on the Bridge, finally decided to turn in, he walked past the door of his First Officer's quarters on the way to his own. But once there he hesitated, looking back at Spock's door, wondering how the Vulcan had taken the blow unconsciously dealt by Lt Uhura.

Too bad, Kirk thought. Spock was just coming out of his self-imposed solitude and beginning to take part in some of the social activities, when Uhura had to come up with that tape. Well, no use crying over spilt milk. And who knows, T'Kahalin's music might do him

some good after all. Should I look in on him, make sure he's all right?

Caught between his desire to help and his fear of intruding, Kirk stood debating with himself. Then, making up his mind, he went to Spock's door and buzzed for entry. There was no reply. After a moment, feeling a little worried, Kirk used his over-ride and walked in, the door sliding shut behind him.

The Captain at once found himself immersed in the hot red atmosphere of Vulcan, and a riot of harmonies so eerie, so captivating, so beautiful that he felt a shiver run down his spine.

So that's T'Kahalin's 'Unchained Memories'. Must be the best piece of music she's written yet. No words can describe it. No wonder Uhura was so taken with it.

Kirk looked round. No sign of Spock. He walked on silently and peered round the partition screen. There in the dark, kneeling in front of the Fire Shrine, was Spock, clad in his ritual robe, his dark head bent over hands joined in meditation.

As he watched his friend bathed in the red glow of the Fire and the flowing music of T'Kahalin's symphony, Kirk had the strange impression that while Spock was right there in front of him he was at the same time far away, in a world of his own, a world of peace and fulfilment, of sorrow and acceptance, of unforgettable memories.

With the sudden feeling of being a intruder, and more moved that he wished to admit, Kirk turned round and quietly tip-toed out of Spock's room.

* * * * *

At precisely the same time, light years away on the planet Vulcan, a solitary

figure was following the narrow defile at the foot of the Xirahna's Head in the wilderness of the Ringing Stones Hills.

Arriving at the area enclosed by tall red cliffs, T'Kahalin stopped and looked around. Nothing had changed. The clear water of the spring was still flowing down to the pool below and desert squirrels were going about their business with scarcely a glance at the newcomer. They knew her now.

The young woman walked slowly to the pool, removed her cloak which she laid aside on a rock, then cupping her hands under the falling drops she brought them to her lips and drank... and never had water tasted so good.

Then, as if performing a ritual, she dipped her hands into the pool and lifted them up brimming over with water, offering them to an invisible presence that only she could feel. She stayed in that position, eyes closed, hands offered, until the water trickling through her fingers was absorbed by the sand at her feet.

Then kneeling down beside the pool T'Kahalin joined her hands in the ritual position and slowly, thankfully, she retreated into meditation, and into the levels of her mind where her memories lay pure, intact and unchained.

